

DISCERNING WHOLISTIC MINISTRY WITHIN LOCAL CHURCH
CARING TEAMS: TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF AGING

A Professional Project
Presented to
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

by
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This professional project, completed by

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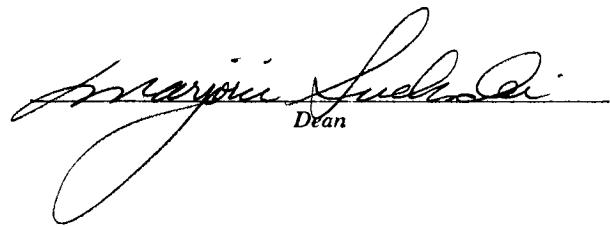
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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Abstract

Discerning Wholistic Ministry Within Local Church

Caring Teams: Toward a Theology of Aging

by

Robert R. Biehler

This project examines opportunities for local churches in a focused ministry of caring. Attention is paid to understanding aging and misconceptions or myths that exist about aged people. Throughout the project, theological reflection relative to the human stresses of modernity and technology will be considered. The effectiveness and problems of a ministry of caring are examined through case study and the "lived stories" of one church's caring team.

Theological reflection, focused on narratives, examines how life stories help us envision new paradigms for wholeness. The tension of living within a time of transition is examined both in a personal story and larger social context. Attention is given to the stories of women and people who live at the boundaries of society.

Caring teams familiar with the Hospice organizational model can learn to interface with hospice care providers, but also recognize their own uniqueness. Attention is given to ministry with people who are dying and the importance of affirmation and hope for those who are living.

This project contrasts moments of meaning which have grounded the people of God historically with emerging world

tensions requiring global concern. Social and technological change challenges us to consider our purpose and sense of meaning. Through reflections on personal stories, the concept of "meaning centers" is examined.

This project focuses on integrating spiritual directions and the educational journey of the Church. An assessment is made of meaningful forms of interpreting the world that can be drawn from Christian tradition. Through exploring familiar Bible stories and the challenges of pressing human boundaries, one may experience unique and enduring moments. Connecting those unique moments empowers individuals to sense the Spirit of God guiding their life journeys.

Finally, the project focuses on pragmatic ways to help people experience meaning-making. Wholistic ministry seeks to integrate differing aspects of life experiences, and understand those experiences which form unique moments. Remembering one's life story through personal auto-biographical writing enables individuals to understand wholeness more completely.

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Prologue

It was winter, and the wind was thrusting snow all about, so much so that street signs became difficult to discern. In driving our car toward West Berlin, we naturally traveled through East Germany. An exit directed us toward Berlin; we took it. In the next moments we got confused and turned around; so obviously did the East German police vehicles so omnipresent. As we reversed our direction no one seemed to notice, or to care. It was the snowstorm, I suspect.

As we now headed toward East Berlin, there was a nervousness that overcame me. I was comforted by seeing a stone highway marker which read, "Haupstadt Berlin." (I might have remembered that the capital city of West Germany in 1981 was Bonn, not Berlin. We had, in fact, been following stone markers dating back to the 1940s or possibly earlier). I should have noted the weathered appearance of the road markers but I didn't.

When the wind stopped driving the snow, we were nearly in the center of East Berlin, and without "papers." At first we were in disbelief, then reality struck sickeningly. How do we get out without explaining how we first got in? It was the time of the infamous wall, you see, a time in time that some will never quite fully grasp and some will never forget.

If we weren't so nervous about our situation, we might

have enjoyed all the unique and strange sights as we traveled through East Berlin. Still, friends had earlier made arrangements to meet us at the zoo in West Berlin and they were waiting for us to join them. Our anxiety grew as no one seemed to acknowledge that West Berlin even existed. We stopped to ask several individuals where we might find an entrance gate. People seemed to avoid looking us in the eye and were just as evasive about directions. It was only later, in talking to friends, that we learned that residents of East Germany were to disavow the existence of West Berlin. It explained much of our cool treatment, but that was later.

Finally, with great difficulty, we found Check Point Charlie. It was there that our anxieties were to turn to fear. We stood for an hour or so in the subfreezing winter night with East German guards conferring about how these Americans got into East Berlin so easily (or, it would seem that's what they discussed). Their AK-47s were often pointed near us, more to disturb us than anything else. That worked too. Finally, however, they let us go.

As we arrived in the American sector of West Berlin, I felt strangely "home." Here, thousands of miles from California, I felt I was in a safe place, where I belonged.

Such a moment as I have described will always be a real part of me, a moment in time, yet still vividly alive. Understanding life's wholeness as one ages,

incorporates many moments that are uniquely alive, moments that have given depth and value to what we believe and to whom we are.

There is a journey quality about our lives that seems to move us toward home, toward that which is meaningful and important to us. This journey is impacted by our life story, but also impacted by what is occurring in the world in which we live. There is also something within most of us longing to right the wrong we have encountered. This longing is also a part of us and gives definition to our lives. Being able to reenter important moments in our lives, to experience similar feelings in the present, and to realize how they have helped to shape us and our community is, in part, what wholeness is about.

We live in a unique time of change and stress, yet it is a spiritual time too, as people still seek the place to which God seems calling them. It was winter when we got lost in East Berlin; it was a time of uncertainty, even fear for us, as winter reminds me of death and colorlessness. I remember the snow covered streets, and lines and lines of people in front of East Berlin food shops. I had only a glance to take in the scene, but it made a lasting impression: Grey drab weather, grey empty shops whose windows were virtually bare of things to sell, and all of the people lined up to get their meager supplies. It is no wonder that we were eager to find Check Point Charlie and go home as soon as possible.

Things change though, if we are patient enough. Just like seasons of the year ultimately move us from winter to spring, nations and people have a way of redefining who they are also. There is no East Germany today, only a country becoming whole. Maybe we human beings can learn something from history and maybe something about our own journeys too.

Introduction

Rather than being a continuation of the culture of narcissism and the me generation, a commitment-to-wholeness can provide our society with a holistic and liberating vision, desperately needed to help guide the cultural transformation. The wisdom of the Hebrew-Christian heritage has invaluable resources to bring to our culture's understanding of wholeness. A church alive and aware of its changing societal context can become a center of transformation where people can learn how to live abundant life in this turbulent, exciting moment in history.¹

The motivation for this project grows out of a deepening concern for effective ministry within the local church with a special focus on ministry with people who are aging. At the core of the problem there seems to be a myopia which focuses on life-stage and social crises and yet remains detached. The stress of rapid social and technological change has changed the landscapes of familiar stories of wholeness and success. The leadership team within local churches needs a fresh new vision empowered by a revisioning of ministry potential. This revisioning is not going to be resolved by any corrective programmatic goals recommended by the larger judicatories, however, because this lack of vision is primarily an inner problem, or qualitative concern, what I would like to call a lack of discernment.

Local congregations need to connect their spiritual insights with a deepening commitment to creativity and

¹ Howard Clinebell, Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 45.

active involvement. A recent United Methodist Bishops' study called Vital Congregations, Faithful Disciples: Vision for the Church encouraged mission and ministry to occur at the local level.² Abstract missional priorities only become real as people begin to become involved with the mission of the church where they are.

Leadership depends upon vision, a knowing kind of vision that discerns patterns and stages of development that can evaluate healthy movement toward what we recognize as growth. Discernment has a spiritual, historical-reflective quality that celebrates and honors unique moments in a local congregation's past that have led to transformation for both individuals and the community. Discernment moves with a critical eye that recognizes truth wherever the truth is spoken to life, and actively seeks to follow that path which leads to broader, deeper truths. Discernment has, in short, a journey quality about it that reflects upon historical moments of inspiration and transformation -- a journey which inspires our footsteps and enlivens our passions.

Discernment looks for meaning behind symbols and helps create artistically sensitive stories using those symbols. Discernment has a feeling quality at its center that does not distrust quantitative or linear thinking, as much as it

² United Methodist Church, Vital Congregations = Faithful Disciples: Vision for the Church, Foundation Document, Council of Bishops (Nashville: Graded Press, 1990).

actively strives to integrate decision making with understanding, compassion and hope.

Theological discernment integrates different modes of thinking and expression. The theological lens focuses not only on specific events, but seeks to understand how God and God's purposes may be found within or beyond those events. Interpretation of significant events, often rooted in an historical occurrence, becomes not only the historian's province, but also the artist's canvas, the novelist's dramatic back drop, the prophet's vision, and so forth. As the storyteller reveals his/her story, events are not only events, but are as milestones or markers on a journey. The course of the journey is punctuated by the detours and side trips and experiences encountered. Sometimes even a destination changes.

People, especially the people of God, focus not only on the facticity of our earthly journeys, but on what purposes lie behind our decisions and what goals beckon us. Human fulfillment itself is a major goal of the journey and becomes a potential realized as we learn to value fulfillment itself. Lived stories take place in an historical time, but individual lives walk into that historical time--each with unique personal stories and hopes. Purposefulness, meaning and passion are spiritual dimensions integrated into our lived journey stories. These emotions and goals are not measured as one quantifies stocks and bonds or furniture, but as one

intrinsically values human experience; that is what is sacred about the human journey.

The church has at its story center a journey motif that is centered on liberation and new possibilities. It is the visionary quality of the promised homeland that motivates passion and leads people to challenge socially and politically dominant forces.

People often conform their expectations to the loudest voices. Today's technological voices have demanded a scientific, rational approach to valuing life. The modern age has focused on youth, vitality, consumption and production. If you are not young or productive, the distinct message has been that you are not valuable, so an arbitrary age for people to see themselves as no longer useful becomes associated with retirement.

Gratefully, people are capturing a new, liberating vision about what is valuable. Age is less a detriment, and, in some cases, is seen as an asset. A new paradigm is emerging where people of all ages are reevaluating what is healthy and whole. From ecological issues to gerontology, creative energy is emerging that refuses to imprison people by limits.

Theology and science, poetry and technology are not really conflicting with each other, but there are problems. Bridges need to be built which will help us to envision a more completely integrated world.

Living within the close of the modern age, people are

caught not only within a time of technological stress and change, but also within a time of an emerging sense of the connectedness of life. Ecological concerns, for instance, have become central discussions in the social science arena, political world, and even theological world, but poets and artists also help us to envision a world as it might be. Narrative theology enables us to discern meaning within the stories of our life worlds, the stories of our faith tradition and the stories of the contemporary culture in which we live.

Ours is an age when philosophers question whether or not science is "progressive"; for example, does science progress toward some improved world, or does it merely change the world? One might ask that question relative to nuclear power in our time, for example. Is it an "advance" or a tragedy? Certainly science and technology have changed in our world and established a sense of personal value relative to being productive within that modern world, but is this change for the better?

John Dominic Crossan, a Catholic theologian, proposes to consider as most interesting the story that art and science, or poetic intuition and scientific achievement are not two simultaneous and separate ways of knowing, but two successive and connected moments of all human knowledge; that there is a continual evolutionary change, but no overall evolutionary progress; and that 'reality' is not the world we create and by our language and our story of what is.³

³ John Dominic Crossan, The Dark Interval (Sonoma, Calif.: Eagle Books, 1988), 24.

The wholistic ministry of lay caring groups in the local church is an attempt to hold together these two forms of knowing of which Crossan speaks--science and art. The intent of these groups is to enhance the potentialities for human actualization and fulfillment through understanding the transition times of person's lives as opportunities for further growth; through examining the role of the Church as an agent for ministry; through understanding the sacredness of accompanying others during the stages of dying and death; and through artistic, interpretative interweaving of journey symbols, especially as those are given meaning by personal life stories.

Contemporary psychologists, counselors and theologians often seek to define movement toward personal integration through developing categories or stages, carefully noting conflict experienced within those stages, transitions between stages, and movement toward ultimate integration or wholeness. From Erik Erickson's epigenesis to James Fowler's stages of faith development, analysts have used this model of stages with significant success. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross uses stages effectively in describing human responses to losses of all sorts, but especially for understanding the final journeys of one's life. Her now classic formula of responding to losses--Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance--are famous for describing transitional stages that lead to integration or

completion.⁴

The Hospice movement, so popular for serving those in the last stages of life's journey, relies heavily on Kubler-Ross's stages as a model. Not only does the categorical sequence of stages help the journeyer to understand the issues of loss and end of life, (i.e., quantity of life, number of years), but it focuses on the importance of the quality of life; it encourages a sense of movement toward the completion of one's earthly journey.

I had an opportunity to help create a hospice program and to serve as a hospice chaplain for a period of years. That interest grew out of my own mother's death in a hospice facility run by the Catholic Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. There, I witnessed the healing wholeness of ministry done with the most tender of touch, the human hand. Devoid of needles and sterile environment, death was embraced as the next stage of an incredible journey. Attending to this time-in-between-times, we discerned compassionate care and hope given with faithful honesty, while cheerfulness was the tenor of communication. A part of the Hospice program of care was an intentional affirmation of life and all of its positive, affirmative colors. Unlike the institutional green of the hospital, this special

4 Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, On Death and Dying (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

building was designed to bring joy and a concept of warmth and hope to those who were dying. Colors were found in cheerful abundance on the walls, the bedding, the carpet and the drapes. All of these help to accept death as a natural part of life. The church added a dimension of hope and dignity focused on the patient's spiritual, emotional and physical need. It provided the warmth of human touch; it pointed toward home not as a place to go to fight disease, but as a place of love and ease. It also pointed to heaven. That understanding of home helped.

In later working with a cross-disciplinary hospice team, I came to see the patient with terminal illness as a whole person, one who had a family also coping with its own losses and pain; I came to see the uniqueness of each person reflected in the photos placed near the bedstead and in other furniture of the patient's home which had been part of the person's life journey. I experienced persons facing the dark night of the soul, concerned about what "evils" they might have committed, now facing a future as uncertain as a rudderless ship upon a sea.

Sometimes patients would wonder about meaning in their lives and would find solace in being able to talk to clergy or sensitized laity about their spiritual questions. Sometimes there was a need to confess in a way that cleansed one's inner person much like a bath is a necessary part of anticipating a special personal event.

People often experienced a particular assurance in receiving the sacrament of holy communion at this time. The words of consecration and reaffirmation claim a special holiness that is hard to describe. In one such telling experience, a dying parishioner asked if he could receive the elements one last time. He had been unable to speak coherently for several weeks, at best getting out one phrase now and then. When we said the Lord's prayer, however, he remembered every word. The tears of his wife and my own bridged some deeper sense of knowing than any logical expression could ever embrace!

Our Caring Ministries team encounters stumbling blocks in trying to understand people's needs too. Sharing stories is important to the team's learning. Often one member will share an experience, such as the one above, and the team will understand the depth of importance in the celebration of communion. Enough insight is gained through discussing the experience that team members come to see a single question like, "Would you like to receive communion?" as a door of opportunity, requiring little explanation. Sometimes hearing what others have done is the best kind of education.

Importantly, the dynamics among members of a hospice team often becomes a focus. What is occurring within their own lives is intertwined with the emotional stress of caregiving. Learning to deal with personal stress issues is an important factor in group dynamics.

If a similar kind of passionate caring could be

translated to churches, local pastoral and lay leaders could energize their parishes for significant ministry, despite the size of the local parish. Caring Ministry teams, while usually numbering between eight and ten, can help each other to keep focused on issues and problems one at a time. This focusing helps reduce stress and seems to make problems more manageable. On a larger social level, the anxiety faced by some people related to apparently disintegrating social values might also be broken into smaller, more manageable parts. As individuals learn to listen caringly and respond specifically, perhaps the larger societal stresses will appear less threatening. Knowing that one is a part of a team who regularly hears, evaluates, and creatively strategizes, might stimulate personal energy and help people discern viable paths for action. This is contrasted with the immobilizing frustration that occurs when vast problems of social or personal change confront us, and we feel no one seems to be able to change what needs to be changed. When people feel alone, they are limited by whatever resources they can gain. Lay ministry teams can learn to anticipate the most common concerns and forms of suffering and can initiate outreach. One such outreach is to discuss what healthy steps people are ready to take, and then to enable people to choose from fewer options and to focus on small victories one day at a time.

Local pastors, particularly in rural parishes, find not only a place where ministry for others can be discussed; but also where they themselves are supported and encouraged. If new pastors could capture the vision of an interdisciplinary team working together to humanize and actualize individual potential, every local parish would become energized.

Tragic or significant events occurring in specific moments in history often come at us with alarming speed, especially so with swift televised news. Particularly the elderly find change difficult, perhaps confusing, and worse, debilitating. A caring team with wholistic concern seeks to move beyond a focus on individual events and to seek meaning-filled connections within a series of events, and we hope, to see God's will somehow being made manifest through those events. It is one thing to understand St. Paul's words, "In everything God works for good for those who love him and who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8: 28, RSV). It is another thing to communicate how disparate events are leading us toward that good end. The wholistic ministry of an interdisciplinary team focuses on the experience and gifts of individuals each contributing to the whole. When individuals sense they have a place where their experiences have value, they begin also to be optimistic about the power they have to do something beyond themselves. When caring ministries teams envision a good response to a specific problem, it is possible the whole

church can contribute toward the solution. The team may, for example, make specific suggestions for a funeral reception, or a fiftieth anniversary celebration, or an effective organization to respond to homelessness or hunger.

The social concerns of today often bear the seeds of tomorrow's healing. Seeing the seeds of opportunity in crises, groups of all ages may find ways to work together to celebrate victories and anticipate healthy responses to tragedies, personal or social.

A team in wholistic ministry also seeks to discern the insights of people who remember where they have been, the crossroads where decisions led them in different directions, and the visions that empowered them to press the boundaries of security and possibility to reach beyond themselves for that which fulfills human potential. As one journeys through time, or ages, one's life story is given definition by what Ross Snyder terms membranes of meaning. If we take meaning-making to be the fundamental vocation of maturing, we contradict much within a technological age which values people only for their ability to produce.

Discerning wholistic ministry may begin with revisiting the stories of faith we've known from childhood and touching the moments in which those stories gave meaning to each of us. One remembers how a fisherman named Simon came to Jesus, and how Jesus looked deeply into his eyes and saw something more. He said, "You are Simon, but

you shall become 'Cephas' which means the Rock" (Matt. 16: 18, RSV). The strange thing is that Peter saw it too, and Peter believed it was possible to live up to his name, and he did. Maybe Abraham Maslow would say Peter became self-actualized, and maybe others would describe the experience as one where he came to himself, or felt his heart strangely warmed. Whatever words one chooses to interpret what occurred that day is less important than the way the encounter became a life affirming moment, a moment transformed beyond itself. Peter would indeed become a rock, or stepping stone, for a whole new movement.

One might also remember a man named Saul, driven by ambition and a lust for power. He was blinded on a road to Damascus but came to see more clearly than most, the dark side within each human story. Encountering that dark side might be the very place of transformation.

As one ages, society's expectation of an upward curve and a resultant downward curve in physical ability (described as an "iconic curve") is the expected norm. While certainly the effects of aging do bring the realities of physical deterioration, we live in the context of a life span. The religious concern for individuals is fundamentally rooted in wholeness. On the individual level, wholeness is the capacity to connect meaningful experience in such a way as to lead to a sense of fulfillment, or satisfaction. On a social level, justice and compassion that is inherently valued moves those who

treasure these values to contribute their energy toward helping society itself to embody justice and compassion.

The concern in this project for the aged and the aging process is to discern how the movement of human life relates to contemporary social realities and, also, to discover possibilities for positive change in ministry with older persons. Through specific and actual stories, the role of a Caring Ministries team and the role of the Church will be addressed in relation to the process of aging in the contemporary United States society.

In a sense, one prepares for old age long before one arrives there, but the awareness of how the older person is treated, what his/her concerns are, how the society treats him/her, needs to be a growing concern for our entire community. Development occurs through the life span of people. Losses are incorporated as normal parts of human development as one moves toward older age. Human dignity and fulfillment become even more important as one reaches later years.

Wholistic ministry with older adults is not only directed to the individual, but needs to be directed also to the family, community, and larger society. Consciousness raising becomes an important task, as well as advocacy.

To be wholistic is especially to understand relational changes. Here one needs to attend to how human beings move through their lives and relate to family, community and society. Full potential for humanness is not only a

personal issue; it has at its core a relational dimension. We recognize that "no man is an island," that indeed, we need each other. When we find ourselves in a place where the rich diversity of our human family celebrates all of our giftedness and unique needs, we will perhaps feel as if we have found our place in a large parade. This parade has many people marching together, and there are instruments and component parts, each having intrinsic value for the parade.

But this is a parade of witnesses--people who believe in hope and renewal and possibility, and who keep listening for it. Persons who have spiritual concern for those who are aging also need to understand the relationship between social change and the possibilities for individuals' growth towards their fullest humanity. This can be done as caring groups seek to identify and celebrate each individual's gifts and relate these to how others meaningfully developed those gifts. Challenging times may find whole new opportunities for individuals to use their gifts to make the world in which they live better. The church proclaims that each person is unique, each has gifts that are important, and each and everyone has a place in this parade.

CHAPTER 1

An Aging World: Crisis and Opportunity

It was the closing days of Advent as I paused to look at the artistry of our newly "greened" sanctuary. Its celebration of Christmas gave me pause to reflect and wonder. The very theme of the season was anticipation and expectation--a looking forward to what we knew was soon to be. The colorful banners focused on these very themes and led one's thoughts like a well written mystery novel to the clues that point to the obvious conclusion.

I wondered where the New Year would lead us as a congregation. Advent is the beginning of the Christian year, but paradoxically, also a season that signals the end of the calendar year. It is a transition time, literally a beginning and an ending, meeting in time.

I looked at the beautiful Chrismon tree made possible because Pat and Harvey had chosen to retire and make their home in our community. Since their retirement they had given much to the life journey of this congregation--particularly its artistic beauty. Upon Harvey's retirement they had chosen to buy a home here, even though they had no other family living nearby. But retirement would not mean sitting back for them; it would be an unfolding artistic opportunity for both Pat and Harvey; a chance to focus on skills they had developed over their lifetimes.

Later, during that same second week of Advent, I drove north along highway 101 and noticed another group of people looking for a home. They were not retired, but were modern nomads, moving from one place to another. Some of them lived in old school buses now converted into make-shift mobile homes. Alongside these, and making the buses look like luxurious accommodations by comparison, were people living in tents. Some of the tents themselves were artistically crafted from old blankets and whatever else these folk might have reclaimed from the streets of their journeys. I wondered about their Christmas and their resolutions for the upcoming year. What goals would lead them, where would they focus their energy, where would these people establish "home"?

Over the radio during the same drive, I remember the announcer reporting President-elect Bill Clinton's cabinet selection process. It would "look like America" was his promise. Clearly this was an indication that there would be a change from the past, a commitment to greater cultural and ethnic diversity would be found on his cabinet. But would the administration also focus real energy on the issues confronting our society? Would it see with different eyes the homelessness, the need for medical care among the unemployed and elderly, the problems of low income among single parents providing sole support for the families, and the myriad of other social ills confronting us in this last decade of the twentieth century?

What of the era now passing? One could not help but wonder about the shift that seemed to be occurring. What would America's goals be in the future now opening? And what of the older era, now represented by the departing World War II naval hero, President George Bush? What do retired Presidents do with their retired life? One former President actually helps build houses for low income people. What other positive retirement models exist?

All of these issues are related and point to crucial problems in our time. The goals we once thought we understood may no longer even reflect the landscape of modern reality. The present, for many, is a time of increased stress and a time of great transition, while the future seems even more uncertain and more rapidly changing than ever. Cultural shifts require a new vision and a reintegration of meaning. While medical technology has improved our idea of healthy life style and has also lengthened our lives, social views of youthful productivity and worth are in conflict with accepted images of retirement and retirement age.

The problem of over-choice, as Alvin Toffler described it in his book Future Shock written over twenty years ago, is a modern reality.¹ Too many choices cause stressful responses, and stress often immobilizes, unless it

1 Alvin Toffler, Future Shock (New York: Random House, 1970).

is channeled.

This same issue of multiple choices effects frustration as goals become confused or changed. The Church too, has reflected ambivalence about where it wants to focus its missional and ministerial energy, clinging to older models of authority while speaking words of liberation and emancipation. The Church sometimes is oblivious to the need to focus effectively in the places where real ministry is needed. Strange indeed, is a call to social justice that diffuses its energy by ignoring the places where the congregation feels untouched or dispassionate about ministry.

Sometimes annual conferences, for example, focus on one arena of social concern or social justice; one that seems important to an urban setting, but ignores issues of a broader human concern. An annual conference for example, may stress the importance of racial tolerance and understanding as a central part of our identified mission, but give few guidelines about how rural churches might respond to homelessness. In setting an urban agenda, even one recognized as deeply important, that agenda may fail to enlist vital concern in a rural community facing critical economic and social distress but less concerned with improved race relations. The problem is a lack of energy focused in all arenas that require the healing touch of God's Spirit and a lack of discernment regarding how the

Church's ministry can be personally involved and effective, and also creative and energizing.

As our culture moves into the twenty-first century, one of the critical questions confronting us will be where we are going and will we be content with being a "hobo" on the journey, or will we learn to see ourselves as "pilgrim." (The terms hobo and pilgrim were suggested by K. C. Hanson, Adjunct Professor of Old Testament and Reference Librarian, School of Theology at Claremont.) A hobo, of course, is one who ambles through life never quite caring about anything or anyone beyond him/herself. As long as the hobo's basic needs are met, that is all that matters. The hobo is adrift, not really a part of the world, either not caring to be involved, or choosing to let the world's problems become too much, to the end that the hobo disengages completely from responsibility. The pilgrim, on the other hand, senses movement and purpose leading him/her toward a future that is not yet fully known. It is in the nuances, hopes, and victories, both personal and social, that the pilgrim senses his/her life has purpose, a common goal with other like-minded pilgrims. The pilgrim is inspired by the goal ahead that promises fulfillment and a sense of sacredness that will bless his/her journey. In a sense a journey toward home is a search for the place where we feel we belong; a place that gives definition, promotes acceptance, and even offers a sense of passion to our lives.

As one looks at the theological issues of aging, one needs to examine the aging of individuals and the aging of society through a similar lens. Some of the very problems confronting individuals, particularly those in the last quarter of their lives, are paralleled in a society dealing with uncomfortable changes as it too matures. Not all the changes are good, and many of these disturb us. Yet, it is often at the crossroad where a shift or readjustment in thinking occurs. At crossroads people often reflect on their life's journey, and they reenter moments when other similar personal crises occurred. In the reliving of those moments, they may realize that the crises provided opportunities for their greatest growth. The reliving of these personal story moments can help us to realize that crises always confront us with opportunities.

Four life crossroads will be examined in the next section as we seek to understand the problems of aging and the church's role in responding. Indeed, some of these problems may well become windows of opportunity as the church seeks to provide a more wholistic understanding of ministry.

Firstly, we need to examine the challenges of aging with attentiveness to specific transition moments such as retirement. Secondly, the role of the church as a new family, or creative community, needs to be examined. Thirdly, the role of the pastor, especially with the frail elderly, needs examination; and finally we need to attend to

care for the caregivers themselves and the critical importance of that care.

Challenges of Aging

In a line from the play Green Acres, we hear "All that's been fastened down is coming loose." In that line, we sense something of the underlying social and cultural anxiety of our time. Indeed, the stress of rapid social and cultural change has impacted our society with almost explosive speed in the last two decades. Finding one's place when one feels out of sync or without a place is difficult at best.

Those who are in the last half of their lives, many of whom are anticipating retirement or who have just entered the retirement phase of their lives, not only wonder where they fit into this new world, but they must also deal with normal personal issues of value and esteem associated with no longer being productive. Interesting, however, is the perspective on second careers that is recently emerging.

Those in the last quarter of their lives, when facing the speed and diversity of cultural shock, also deal with a changed sense of meaning and fulfillment as they realize that the goals they once honored may no longer be the goals honored by others of their contemporary world. The pressures of a social era set adrift by overchoice may enhance a sense of personal disintegration, even crisis. We are defined, in part, by our relationship to the movements in our community and world.

Especially in the last quarter of their lives, attentiveness will be necessary to help maintain the dignity of the frail elderly for whom the stress of change is most difficult. But long before frailty determines needs, aging itself might be redefined to be seen as a stage on a long journey. People entering the last significant stage of their lives, often signaled by retirement, can be encouraged to develop different interests and skills, form new friendships, or perhaps discover a new purpose in responding to a significant social need in their community.

Few places in our society exist for people to reflect on meaning and purpose in the aging process. Medically oriented services have sprung up in response to the aged body's need, and social services have greatly expanded to help fulfill social needs. Adult day care centers, for example, encourage the elderly to form new friends, develop interests and enjoy being with those whose age related values are similar. In both medical and social services, however, the idea is still reinforced that aging leads to deterioration, and the declining senior needs to prepare for the worst.

Here caring ministry teams, when aware of the concerns facing individuals, can help provide a perspective of wholeness and healing by helping people to define where they have a place, and where they are needed. Through group discussions and analysis, insights can be gained. Often hearing the stories of others help us to understand our own

stories. As we move toward greater humanness, caring about other people moves us from dealing with other people's problems to centering ourselves in their lived stories. Such learning may lead us to encourage people toward new goals.

The religious understanding of the aging process is then normative in character. It interprets aging in relation to the movement toward humanness or fulfillment. There are, however, many kinds of language to describe this movement toward humanness. I would prefer to define this movement toward humanness as a movement toward becoming a center of freedom and love, in a caring community and in a "justicing" society. Another way is to speak of meaning. Human beings are "meaning makers". To be human is to discover, uncover, recover meaning From a religious perspective, we will want to know what can be done to nurture the individual's movement toward becoming a center of freedom and love. We will want to encourage the kind of family and community contexts which nurture such becoming and the societal structures which make for equity and fairness in the treatment of individuals and groups. We need to ask what is being done or not being done to undergird or erode the individual's personal identity and integrity and relatedness (i.e. the freedom and centeredness) and the ability to give and receive love (mutuality). Together these constitute the dignity of the human individual. *

Life crisis issues seem to impact us as we attend to a lostness or lack of purposefulness. Retirement is fertile ground for people to cultivate such emotions. It is one of those major milestones where previous life goals face dramatic shift. One's sense of identity and one's relation

2 Perry LeFevre, "Toward a Theology of Aging," in Aging and the Human Spirit, eds. Perry LeFevre and Carol LeFevre, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1985), 47-48.

to the community begins to move in new directions. Here too is a time when older relationships, perhaps forged by one's work, also change, and new friendships can be discovered.

Often one does not even think much of his or her value or of friendships until retirement nears. At retirement, virtually overnight, one may feel non-productive. Living in a society that seems to equate productivity with human worth, one also begins to deal with loss of esteem.

Virtually all of the early part of life, most people orient toward producing and accumulating material wealth. Interestingly, as one focuses on how much of his/her life is left (as opposed to "What am I going to do when I grow up?"), a noticeable shift takes place -- a shift toward giving away rather than accumulating more. Still, our society has nurtured a positive self-image based in youthfulness and a material life style. Success is defined in terms of earning more dollars and buying more things to produce a sense of comfort. To be successful is to be productive, to produce is to contribute, to be contributing one's labor for monetary reimbursement. One day the paycheck stops, and so does the meaningful, productive life, at least for many. If one is not productive, i.e., creating goods or services, one often loses a part of his/her identity. Especially this is evident in men who, apart from their job, have little to say about who they are (i.e., I am defined and I have value by what I do for a living).

Eugene Bianchi approaches the issue of retirement and

self-image from a unique perspective. He focuses on understanding all of life as a spiritual journey, but he chooses in his book, Aging as Spiritual Journey, to begin in the "middle" and looks backward at youthful achieving and forward to what lies ahead. Especially insightful is his chapter on challenges of world and work as he relates to what retirement does to the psyche of those in mid-life. Here too, early retirement, or the loss of one's job, creates emotional loss of identity.

To understand how deeply occupation contributes to identity in our culture, we have only to observe the extreme trauma that loss of a job causes in a middle-aged person. In addition to the economic threat to self and family, job loss profoundly shakes the worker's sense of self-confidence and self-esteem. For many, life's meaning depends on their jobs; when jobs are lost, the significance of existence is in jeopardy.³

The loss of a job in mid-life can become an opportunity to examine what kind of future job is most gratifying. Bianchi focuses on the unique perspective of job or career choices by suggesting deeper reflection and care.

After relating to Studs Terkel's image of the middle-aged person who is victimized by retaining unrewarding even numbing jobs, Bianchi concludes:

In a certain way, the loss experienced in these mid-life hangers-on may be greater than that of actual job loss. Upon the loss of a job, people are forced to reconsider not only a series of job

³ Eugene C. Bianchi, Aging As a Spiritual Journey (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 28.

options, but also what kind of work would contribute most in the middle years to a person's development.

Thus the challenge and real losses merit much reflection in middle life. We sell people short; many more than we think may be looking for a calling, rather than a mere job, which may prove too small for the human spirit.⁴

Within each human being there seems a need to belong, to find one's place, but also a need to contribute and to feel needed. It is difficult to understand worth apart from work for many people, but discerning a sense of "call" or discerning other gifts one has, may open the richest chapter of one's life. As one contemplates retirement, one begins to review his/her life's goals and to question where one's life now seems to be going: Where is fulfillment and meaning, where can I find new friendships and give and receive a love that nurtures. Indeed, a "calling" into the future may be discerning a whole new story of one's life and meaning.

Retirement: The Church's New Opportunity

Evelyn and James Whitehead have a way of describing our mixed feelings about retirement that brings a rich, religious insight that might enable new opportunities not only for individuals, but also for the Church. In their chapter, "Retirement as a Religious Event," they encourage the Christian community to focus on the nature of the event of retirement as almost sacramental. "Such a transition (retirement) appears to a believer as not only a time of

4 Bianchi, 28.

danger, but also as a special opportunity for learning and growth--as a time of grace and the visitation of God." ⁵

Initially faith communities may provide opportunities for people to talk about their distress related to the experience of retirement. In later stages of transition where ambiguities arise, the question of whom one is, apart from his/her job, will arise. Here the religious community may assist people to recall

that separation from our former social identity and its signs of worth can have religious significance. This separation invites one to a level of self-acceptance that a busy, achievement-oriented adult life may well have obscured. Worth is, finally, not in productivity. Personal value is founded in something more basic than power or responsibility or salary. It rests on the rock of God's love. The cultural phenomenon of retirement can thus serve a religious function.⁶

One of the important challenges and opportunities for any local church, is today's retired person. Here we meet people in transition, seeking a new definition of their life's purposes. Again, attention to narrowed focus is helpful. While the trend for the near future is an increasingly early age for retirement and increasingly healthy individuals well into the last quarter of their

5 Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, "Retirement as a Religious Event," in Ministry with the Aging: Designs, Challenges, Foundations, ed. William Clements (New York: Haworth Press, 1989), 132.

6 Whitehead and Whitehead, 132-33.

lives, the kind of opportunities offered to retirees by the church need to be meaning-filled. This will require the church to keep focused on the tasks or goals it needs to accomplish, and to seek a match between individual interests and these tasks and goals. Such forethought focuses on the need for human beings to find meaning and purpose--a call, if you will.

My personal experience with retirees on boards of trustees has been wonderful. Often these men and women have skills developed over a life time, and interests that they want to develop further. A task given by a pastor or church is often met with a level of interest not found in younger people stressed by job or family time constraints.

Importantly, friendships are formed as tasks within the Church are accepted. There is a unique bonding of men within the church that seems not to exist within the work-a-day world. Newly retired men seem to enjoy opportunities to work on tasks with other groups of men with similar interests. While women's groups have nurtured friendships within the church for years, men's groups require more intentionality. Yet, it is time well invested.

It is moving to see artistry and interest blend in a growing commitment. Fulfillment for men and women is created by meaningful tasks in part, but in larger portion it is the friendship community itself that fulfills the need to feel one has found one's place.

Billy was a maintenance foreman for a large airline, a problem solver to say the least. His formal education was limited, but his problem solving skills were incredible. One of his interests which he never developed, however, was woodworking.

"Say, Bill, would you be interested in a challenge?" I tried to be as specific as I could be when I approached this newly retired parishioner. "The Church needs a new baptismal font in an octagonal shape that tapers at the top, and oh, by the way, the Church hasn't much money for the task." Needless to say, he took on the task and did a beautiful job. He also charged us, but only for the materials. More importantly, the baptismal font stands in obvious view each time Billy enters the Sanctuary. His commitment financially, emotionally and spiritually, has grown ever since. He has not only found his place, but it is a place that nurtures his need for fulfillment.

Focusing on tasks and giving them to people empowers their creativity. It also helps individuals to claim their places in a community where they are accepted as they are, not for what positions or titles they might have held.

The Last Quarter of Life and a Change of Rules

The question of meaning, value and one's place may be even more intense for those in the last quarter of their lives. Indeed, these have seen their cultural world shift more than others. Not only are the scenes of our contemporary world alarming, but the values of those people

in their last quarter may now come into question, and familiar goals may be displaced. It is a time when adult children encounter the reality of their parent's frailty too.

The reality of deteriorating health certainly becomes more obvious in most people during this last quarter of life. The internal changes are perhaps just as great. Loss, confusion, a sense of not being able to solve problems leads to a time of great internal stress or even crisis.

In an interesting chapter in Ministry with the Aging, James Ewing tells a common story of his father who tells him "you'd better come." In telling that story Ewing touches on steps that helped him as an adult to understand and cope with a time of significant transition in his relationship with his father. His is a positive story, helping the reader to see a healthy approach to dealing with this significant transition time. In his story he notes his surprise as he reflected on the gradual decline of his parents' health and recalled how quickly that all seemed to change. In their last few years there were increasingly frequent doctors' visits and more hospital stays. From precipitating events, he documented how he noticed that his aging parents could no longer manage their normal life routines. In his open concern for his parents' welfare, he sought advice from their pastor in a critical emotional time for them, and a critical time for himself as well. The reality of accepting their deteriorating health and their

inability to manage life routines led him to encounter internal crises.

It is in such moments as these caring ministries teams can ease the stresses on those who are increasingly frail and, also, on adult children who are trying to understand the crises of their loved ones.

James Ewing affirms the value of friends, neighbors, and pastors during this time of transition.

In his book Childhood and Society Erik Erickson has offered a way to understand the struggle of internal crises. In his description of the eighth developmental stage of life he speaks of the polarity continuum of integrity versus despair. Directly confronting our feelings of the loss of life's meaning eventuated in an affirmation of a new integrity, but this would not have happened without the presence of friends, neighbors, and pastor. This presence, manifested in the concrete offers of help, provided a context which affirmed continued living in the midst of life's disintegration. ⁷

Encountering such a crisis time through the eyes of an adult child is one way of seeing the experience of aging. Another way is to see it through the perspective of the Caring Ministries team of our church. What follows is a case study describing a story of aging that was far more tense than Ewing's, and a time when the reality of losses for a frail elderly parent were less considered.

7 James W. Ewing, "Adults with Parents in Crisis: A Personal Account," in Ministry with the Aging: Designs, Challenges, Foundations, ed. William Clements (New York: Haworth Press, 1989), 205.

A Case Study

Perhaps the most traumatic experience for one in the last quarter of his/her life is that of leaving home. In that transition time reality is painful.

In the following true story, our caring ministries team learned much about the dynamics of leaving home for a ninety-two year old woman whom we will call Corrie.

I had just returned home from several visits on December 24th when my wife told me that there had been an urgent telephone call from the Adult Day Care Supervisor; it was about Corrie. The Adult Day Care Supervisor related the story to me in which she was just becoming involved.

"It's Corrie," she said. I knew that there had been a dramatic change in Corrie's ability to cope, in these last two months especially. Our Caring Ministries team had discussed her health change many times over the previous two years. The health care provider had come to her home that morning to assist her in some needed, but minor physical problem. When she arrived she banged on the door, as instructed, knowing that Corrie was virtually deaf. This not working, she went to the back door just off the kitchen. Here she began to knock again, but also noticed heavy smoke coming from the kitchen area. She pounded harder on this door, but could not get a response from Corrie. She grew very concerned and contacted the fire department which responded immediately. The firefighters broke the lock on the back door and entered the kitchen to find a kettle of

some now unknown substance smoking on the stove. There was no actual fire or danger.

Corrie? Oh, Corrie was in the bedroom sewing a button on a sweater and said she'd forgotten all about the pot on the stove. What was all the fuss?

"Reverend," said the Adult Day Coordinator, "we think Corrie perhaps would be more safe in a motel room tonight rather than in a building where there's no lock on the back door. Besides, the stove is clearly a risk."

I was able to assist in the decision making process and strongly suggested that they do not put Corrie in a motel, assuring the Adult Day Care Coordinator that Corrie would be much better off in a house she knew well, even if it were not secured by a lock on the kitchen door. I went on to assure her that neighbors would be sure to care for Corrie until her daughters arrived, which was expected to be in a matter of days. In the interim I suggested they cut off the gas to the stove and I would arrange for hot meals to be brought to Corrie over the Christmas holiday period.

In this case, I had already been in touch with Corrie's daughters earlier in the month and had, more than once, indicated a growing concern for Corrie's safety. While family illness and winter driving conditions had changed both of her daughters' plans on more than one occasion already, they assured me that this time they would be in our community for a period of one week following the Christmas

holiday. During the week that they planned to be here, they would make arrangements for their mom.

The adult daughters and their husbands arrived near the end of the month. Each of the daughters had, upon her own retirement, chosen to make her home in the same community where her children and grandchildren lived. What to do with mom had been a growing concern, but actual visits to mom had grown infrequent. These visits also seemed increasingly strained. Corrie was convinced that their goal was to come and take her away from her home. Her fear proved to be well founded. One day, while I was in the office at church a phone call came:

We have made arrangements to have Mom brought down to near Santa Barbara. She will eventually come to like the nice, modern, senior residence center there. Also, Corrie's granddaughter, you know, the one Corrie talks about so much? She will visit Grandma regularly; she is very religious, you know.

The promised week-long visit lasted less than five days. I received a phone call on the fourth day telling me that they would all be leaving in the morning. They said, "No, there will be no real opportunity for us to tell others, but if you want to make contact with some of Corrie's friends, that will be O.K. But if people want to say 'Good-bye,' they'll have to come by tonight; we are leaving first thing in the morning." I made hasty phone calls to our caring ministries team members, especially concerned to reach the two who had been the closest to

Corrie. I phoned or contacted Corrie's neighbors, too. All were surprised that things were moving so rapidly, and all between the time of Christmas and New Year's Day.

Corrie had been told by her daughters that she was going to visit her granddaughter for the New Year's holiday. Corrie seemed overjoyed and overwhelmed by her daughter's special caring.

Special friends knew this was to be a final chapter for Corrie, and made holiday rearrangements in already busy schedules, to stop by Corrie's home. These special friends knew this was their last chance to take a long last look into happy eyes, and say good-bye to a special friend.

It was the beginning of a new life and home for Corrie, but also an ending. She would leave friends and a home she had known most of her life; a home as much a part of her life as it could be. She and the house were as one, so rich were the memories that covered that house's walls, floors and bedding. A part of her life would, I suspect, always be within those walls. Yet, she would soon adjust to a new environment; one where her granddaughter would be an active visitor; one where her great granddaughter would sit on her new apartment rug. She would build a new home. Still, she would be missed by all of us, and letters from her would confirm how deeply she was touched by all our deep concern for her.

Case Reflection

Mary Jane S. Van Meter and Patricia Johnson, in their article on family decision making and religious organizations, stressed the importance of family members being involved in an ongoing decision making process.⁸ In reviewing some of their thoughts, one could see where Corrie's case might have been handled differently.

The pastor, in relating with a family and a family member with deteriorating health, might function as a counselor, aiding the family to decide what is the best course of action. According to Van Meter and Johnson:

Decision counseling refers to a counselor and a client (which can be an individual or a group) working together to diagnose and improve the client's decision-making efforts.

The decision counselor does not give advice to what the decision should be and refrains from giving an opinion as to whether a course of action is good or bad. Rather, the decision counselor tries to help clients make the fullest possible use of their own resources for making the best possible decision.⁹

Important in all such decision is an opportunity for all family members to participate in such a discussion. Here everyone's suggestions and options are considered.

If our team had followed the recommendations of Van

⁸ Mary Jane S. Van Meter and Patricia Johnson, "Family Decision Making, Long-Term Care for the Elderly and the Role of Religious Organizations, Part III: Interventions for Religious Professionals and Organizations," Journal of Religion and Aging 1 (Summer 1985): 73-87.

⁹ Ibid., 78.

Meter and Johnson, the family might have gathered to discuss their feelings and options more than once, and certainly not only over the phone, out of the hearing of Corrie.

As it was, the family did make contact with each other and eventually the pastor, but Corrie, for the most part, was left out of the discussion. Family members were involved with their best interests and made a decision in keeping with their value system, but Corrie's fears of being taken from her home against her will finally came to pass.

When the adult children finally made a decision, the Caring Ministries team felt uncomfortable when Corrie was not even able to say good-bye to us or to her home of over sixty years. We were able to say good-bye to her, but all along she was led to believe that this was only a holiday visit to her granddaughter's. Our good-byes were therefore limited and not fully honest.

As a team, we felt that it would have been better for Corrie to be involved in that decision making process. One of our goals in the future might be to discern how we can help others to begin weighing possible similar options earlier, i.e., finding a "live-in caretaker" or moving toward a retirement residence decision. We have also decided that it is important for our Caring Ministries team to initiate discussion with family members prior to a time when a crisis precipitates immediate action. If we had acted in the above case to get the family members discussing a

possible move with Corrie and us before such a decision ultimately became reality, Corrie might have been happier, and so would we. If the church continues to get involved in caring ministries of this sort, being more clearly focused about instigating early discussion with family members would be a very positive and enlightening outreach.

I used the above case study to indicate how the social and cultural stresses are interwoven, as are the ethical, spiritual and cultural issues confronting the church, especially as these concerns relate to an individual in the last quarter of life who is facing a fairly common problem.

The Caring Ministries team involved with Corrie had a unique opportunity to be involved in specific, helpful responses. While there may be other positive opportunities for ministry, the trauma of giving up one's home and independence is a little like surrendering your identity, and certainly your independence. All along one's life, one prepares for living independently, and then, or so it seems, the physical limitations of aging impact us and independence no longer is the rule.

The Role of the Church as Creative Community

We human beings are defined by our relationships, not only on a personal basis, but in bonds that tie us to family, community and even the larger society. The Church is uniquely suited to be a creative community within that larger society--a community marked by servanthood and celebration.

The Church as Servant Community

To form the Church as a creative community is to embody a spirit of servanthood. Doing something to aid people in need or distress, for example, helps add new definition and purpose to our lives. Such decisions to help also adds greatly to our own identity and sense of wholeness.

Homelessness might be a case in point. The very presence of people living in cars or ditches in near zero degree weather threatens our sense that the world we have helped to shape cares about human suffering.

Recently the issue struck our small community as the report was heard of people dying due to exposure to the cold weather. While there were cries for the government to do something, it was all too clear that the state, county and city coffers were nearly depleted. People have grown accustomed to the government leading the way in solving problems like these, but governments and agencies have a way of losing touch with humanity. Even official denominational missional priorities fail sometimes to engender any real passion because they are equated too frequently with faceless people asking for money to give to other people we will never see. At some point we need to focus on hurting people who are our neighbors; we need, as the Church, to understand that authentic community focuses on personal touching and personal serving. The Church needs to examine its own bureaucracy and ask how it is focusing people's passion and energy, or if it is

continuing to expect people to be generous and committed but in a detached way.

A phone call came from a retired woman working at a hastily established winter shelter for homeless people. She phoned not the pastor, but one of our long retired members whose passion for children, and especially for children from low income homes, refuses to be stifled. In our Church this woman, a retired educator, is honored more than some others as she has had a long history of involvement in this area of helping others. The people with whom she now interacts, however, are primarily in the age group who are long retired.

One Sunday morning during the worship service, this woman stood up and challenged the people assembled to respond to the visible human distress at our doorstep. It was a moment frozen in time as tears rolled down her cheeks while she spoke. Later, the power of her sentiment found incredibly positive response. Could our church provide one hundred meals seven times over the next seven weeks? But OUR church has given so much this year already!! It is the end of the calendar year and there's no money in the budget. Besides, we did build two Habitat for Humanity houses this year, isn't that enough? But there it was, a specific challenge--a question asked.

The challenge that morning was focused on a specific, possible response; the boundaries of our response were understandable; the length of requested commitment was

clear. We were asked if we might not do this one more thing. All of a sudden the overwhelming issue of homelessness was focused on one task that we could do, and even though it was the end of our year and we had no money, and we were tired from doing so many extra mile events, our church responded with an almost shocking YES! More importantly, providing those seven hundred meals energized people to focus on something positive that they could actually, physically touch.

As the Church responded specifically by asking congregational members to give of themselves and get involved in this time-limited way, the passion for serving began to spread into other missional concerns. As we focused on this specific task, it was mixture of elderly and younger people working side by side, not segregated by age, who responded. The focus was on service--direct, short-term, specific. But in that one challenge, the fire of mission was rekindled.

Some say that the church is always asking for money, and they seem right. If money becomes the only request that people hear, they may well ultimately withdraw. Asking for help, however--requesting specific, focused help for a real and understood need--is exactly what calls people to respond, to work side by side in service. This calls them to reach beyond themselves, to touch some common goal to which people of faith have been committed for thousands of years. We are related as human beings on

a journey through time. Where does God call us to go, to help shape who we are?

Incredible was our church's mission response in all categories in 1992 as the year ended. It was a year of specific, focused challenges; people gave and gave, but I think they also found. This was possible because the Church decided to focus on staying in touch. You need to ask caringly, focus diligently, and challenge directly. When the goals are clear, people capture the vision. To be whole, human beings need to give and take within authentic community. We must learn again the value of working together on a common, focused call, not only opening check books to ubiquitous apportionments defined by line items on a budget.

Authenticity demands a willingness to be open to new messages and new journeys, even painful ones. Entering the pain often leads to healing. The cries for justice for those on the margin of our society calls for a revisioning of the gifts and graces of our cultural diversity. It also means entering into the real, contemporary world of our own bigotry and shame. Authentic community listens and cares to hear the stories that are being told.

The role of the church as authentically caring community is witnessed as the Church learns to focus on serving those who are alone or separated from nuclear family too. Indeed, understanding that the Church exists in a place and time identified by Vance Packard as A Nation of

Strangers may help in discerning the lostness and the longing for home within the context of a nation moving out of a more provincial time into a modern and post modern age.¹⁰ His premise in that book was that in the last half of the twentieth century American businesses often required workers to transplant themselves in order to meet the needs of the business community. In frequently moving, people left the small towns and communities they had known for generations. In accepting the modern reality of moving for work, people learned to define themselves less and less by neighbors whom they knew well over a long period of time. In today's societies people often do not even know their neighbors.

In such a time, the place where friendship and purpose are found can be as an oasis in the desert. The church may be that oasis. Here are pockets of caring and supportive community. The Church can also help individuals to envision and respond to new challenges that energize. Working together on tasks that genuinely respond to the needs of the human family bonds us together for the next stage of our journey. When we discover the place where we are accepted and refreshed, we discover opportunities for our greatest development. When we ask "What next?" we find serving others has always been the highest calling of the church.

10 Vance Packard, A Nation of Strangers (New York: David McKay, 1972).

In serving we discover our own potential for wholeness.

The Church as Celebrative Community

One of the most creative and caring ways to strengthen community is to focus on celebrations, especially celebrations marking landmarks in human relationships. Caring ministries teams, in being especially sensitive to those in the last half and last quarter of their lives, can make celebrations a central focus. Celebrations like fiftieth wedding anniversaries are usually done by the family, but what happens when there is no family or no family able and willing to spend the energy for such celebrations?

Celebrations of fifty years of marriage, or Golden Anniversaries, are becoming more common now. How the celebration is marked by caring communities often is a growing witness to the sense of community within the church.

There have been other suggestions for life's landmarks, too, like celebrations for divorce and celebrations for retirement. Transition points are often opportunities for the church to celebrate our common human journeys and victories, as well as beginning the healing process of our woundedness.

One of the more interesting celebrations, and I suspect likely one to become more common, is one that is difficult to name. It is a funeral or memorial service held when the family cannot travel to the community where the actual service is being held.

A frail elderly couple, now separated by miles from the last remaining family, called the pastor to hold a memorial service in our Sanctuary recently. "Well, for whom is the service to be held?" I asked. "Oh, it's not for us, it is for Blanche's sister in Iowa. We can't get there, so we'd like to have a moment of prayer and remembering in our Sanctuary here in Arcata at the same hour that the service is being held in Iowa."

It was a moving service. Such celebrations affirm our connections in a way unique to the Church and its life. Here timing is important, as frail elderly still suffer when loved ones die certainly, but these people often cannot attend funeral services miles away. A visit from a Caring Ministries team member at the moment of a relative's surgery, or at the hour of the funeral, helps connect people with caring, love and hope.

In a time when distance and space has created isolation from nuclear family, often when neighbors are even unknown, the Church can become a substitute family. The Caring Ministries team, charged with focusing on specific landmarks, on specific individuals' lives, can be the warm, human touch that communicates dignity and notices important moments for celebration. Often times one of the Caring team has an insight from his or her own inspired experiences which is shared with the rest of the team as a celebration possibility. The purpose for the celebration may even be oblique but deemed timely for multiple reasons.

Celebrations of landmarks may create the very moment for community sharing that some people are searching for but cannot find.

Our committee once created a special litany for a fiftieth wedding anniversary where the couple did not want to "repeat their vows" but wanted to mark the event. That litany discussion led us to think about further litanies for landmarks accomplished within the more normal life of the worshipping community. As we have seasons for the Christian year, perhaps we could develop litanies for seasons of a person's life, or for landmarks on the way.

Recently a photo was taken of all of our active ninety year olds; it appeared in several papers locally. "The Church cares," was the message, "to keep their frail elderly an active part of the family." We are not ashamed of our older family members, nor are we captured by the youth culture. We affirm that age brings maturity, and the faith which we celebrate honors our fathers and mothers.

The beauty of all this is that caring teams can be created in churches of all sizes, and in all places. Sometimes in smaller or older congregations, people lament the absence of younger people providing leadership. Even if the congregational size is limited, those who are there deserve the best possible ministry. A Caring Ministries team has no age limit, nor is there a specific size requirement. Herein lies its special value for smaller churches.

Of significance in the area of resources for caring groups is the Stephen's Ministries material. Designed for lay ministry, this material sets out in specific lesson plans for integrating successful caring ministry.¹¹ From visiting the lonely, to checking up on the homebound, to going to the grocery store or taking someone to the doctor, teams of caring people can energize any local parish. More importantly, however, the people of God recognize the importance of meaningful service and this ministry provides just that.

The Role of the Pastor

In most cases it is the pastor who must initiate the call for assistance in developing a caring ministries team. His or her own unique role in identifying individuals whose needs are not being met is central. Indeed, it is often, but not always, the pastor who identifies the individuals that she/he would like to aid, but cannot. In recognizing his/her limits, the call to help may be one of the most energizing and creative things the pastor can do.

While there may be many who wish to serve, the pastor may be more able to identify those who can keep confidentiality and provide helpful assistance than someone who originates an idea but doesn't know where or how to start. While privately selecting those who he/she deems possible

11 For more information on the Stephen Ministries write: Stephen Ministries, 8016 Dale, St. Louis, MO 63117-1449.

Caring Ministries team members may seem less than democratic, it is critically important to do basic screening to assure the success of the ministry.

Clearly the role of the pastor in mediating problems, developing celebrations, creating litanies, or merely serving as a mirror for reality checks, frequently calls him/her to a place of decision. In times of uncertainty, the common experiences of the caring team help the pastor to test his/her own perceptions about certain individuals who may need assistance, but finally the pastor is the one to whom people most frequently turn for a decision.

When adult children are not frequent visitors, they deeply appreciate the existence of a caring team. While one or more individuals on the caring team may form unique personal bonds with a frail elderly person, the pastor still is a primary contact for the adult children of that person.

Ultimately the pastor decides to phone the adult children of the frail elderly to inform them a change has taken place. Phone calls from adult children seeking further information about their loved ones are usually not directed to the caring committee itself, but to the pastor. The pastor is seen as the one who has gathered accurate information and made assessments, and the one who may also be contacted to initiate new directives from adult children or, perhaps, from medical or social services requesting assistance.

The pastor serves in a unique place that allows him/her to enter the lives of people at any stage of their life's journeys. The celebrative role at baptism for infants is connected to the celebration of one's life at a memorial service. Pastors, more than others, have been trained to honor and celebrate life's transitions. They are recognized by the society as individuals who have responsibilities to draw upon personal resources to find the right words to define those transitions. In their unique capacity to recall the stories of our tradition's history, they also are seen as interpreters of the spiritual journey. In a sense, they are the keepers of the celebrative traditions, who recognize when landmarks are being encountered, and can point them out. In another sense they may be perceived as the drum major leading a parade. It is comforting to believe that someone recognizes not only where we have been, but who also believes that life's journeys are still leading us somewhere ahead.

The pastor's role is to be the leader, one who recognizes both his/her limits, but who also accepts the responsibility of leadership.

Caring for the Caregivers

Often the greatest growth occurs not as one ministers to those who need help, but to the group providing that help. Caring Ministries members often forge incredibly personal bonds with individuals. While not wanting to be seen as decision makers, they often feel more responsible

than even the children of those being helped. Here team members 'touch' the life of the care-provider as well as those receiving care. The team can help all of these persons realize that they are not alone in the feelings they may be experiencing.

Caring for One Another

In a recent discussion with a woman from a church without a caring group, the woman told her story of relating with an aged individual who was growing more and more dependent upon her. The nearly blind woman had few friends, and had grown especially dependent upon Jenny. Though Jenny appreciated this woman's companionship, Jenny realized that such dependence was very disconcerting. "What can I do about my aloneness and this responsibility?" Jenny asked me.

I shared that our Caring Ministries team often faced the kind of close bonding she experienced, and that I was grateful for the times when we could discuss uncertainties when we experienced clouded judgment. I went on to explain that our team focused on meeting physical, social and spiritual needs. Often, however, we helped people keep doctors' appointments, or did grocery shopping. Sometimes we provided meals if there was an illness, or if an individual had lost a family member to death. Often we helped people cope with life threatening illness, but most commonly we were there to listen and encourage the people who were facing significant transitions and had few others to whom they could turn. Loneliness, indeed, seemed to be

the predominant problem we encountered. Occasionally we got to be substitute family and became involved in planning special birthday parties or anniversaries, but this was not common. Within the team meetings we talk about specific needs of individuals, and, of course, with great confidentiality. In talking together our group seeks suggestions for specific problems, and also seeks healthy emotional responses when we experience genuine confusion about appropriate responses that might be made. We journey together.

I saw tears welling up in Jenny's eyes as she realized she was trying to do what an entire team was doing in our church. I also realized that it was not the pragmatic "how to's" she was having difficulty with, but her aloneness in swimming in deep water. I realized that what our church had done was not so much new, but it was intentional and more integrated than was occurring elsewhere. I determined to invite Jenny to our next Caring Ministries team meeting so that she could understand the value of a team of individuals who supported each other and analyzed their efforts. Just knowing limits for involvement is sometimes critical. Often in our own gatherings, the primary question becomes one of personal intensity. Burnout occurs when one realizes he or she is growing "too close" to the someone who is increasingly dependent on us. Often one experiences a nagging sense of guilt if one cannot do more. Often the

main discussion in our group has to do with avoiding the burn out related to this guilt response.

We have noted that sometimes what seems to be expected from those receiving care feels to us like a demand. Being able to withdraw from the demands is not easy. Having reality checks with others can help one see that guilt is not only draining of energy, but not helpful.

Working with Community Services

While the wholistic ministry discussed in this project and the ministry with caring groups in the local Church are primarily focused on the spiritual journey and personal care-giving, there is a need also to touch on specific community resources.

In virtually every community, a community services guide is available -- often one especially designed for senior citizens. This guide lists everything from health care to recreation opportunities. Often a visit to a local nutrition center for seniors leads one to a host of resources. Senior information and referral services exist in virtually every large community; here again the resources usually are abundant. If one wanted to engage in political issues relative to aging, the National Council on Aging provides an incredible array of bills before Congress, educational opportunities and on-going discussions about

senior issues.¹² The Journal of Religion and Aging is an invaluable resource in helping one to understand components of one's emotional, social, and psychological ministry.

Dorothy Gager's two small volumes entitled It's My Move and It's Your Move, analyze the process step by step.¹³ Her useful charts help one to identify items related to security, health and a myriad of other needs of homebound seniors. Gager also significantly emphasizes how the caring ministry team member needs to make certain initial moves, but needs to encourage the one being cared for to be as responsible and as independent as possible.

While one cannot expect Caring Ministries members in a local church to have a vast variety of experience, knowing trained service providers from a cross disciplinary background is valuable. Inviting these individuals to a gathering of one's own ministry team session is valuable for the information gained, but also in getting to know individuals as persons who are involved in care. Local hospitals often have specialized areas of service and are happy to have health educators, nutritionists, nurses, etc. invited to speak. The senior ombudsman program is also extremely helpful in relating to convalescent hospital

12 National Council on Aging, 409 Third Street SW, Washington, DC 20024.

13 Dorothy Gager, It's My Move (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1987); and It's Your Move (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1987).

ministry, and these individuals usually are more than happy to speak to church groups. These educational opportunities foster a deeper understanding of life in convalescent hospitals, as well as understanding of the ethical issues related to the general care of the frail elderly who may have no family or regular visitors.

In Humboldt County, the Redwoods Ombudsman program seeks to assure that quality care is being provided to senior residents of local convalescent homes. By making unscheduled stops at undetermined intervals, these people check to see if patient's needs are cared for, if patients are being walked or neglected, if patients seem to be over-medicated and safe, etc. Respected by the court, the Ombudsman program seeks moral, ethical and medical, and human care for convalescent home residents.

As local hospital representatives, or adult day care representatives or nutrition site supervisors share their concerns and specific duties, we in the local church develop a broader understanding of the potential care available. Those within the community are often seeking further volunteers or models apart from what is commonly available. Spiritual support is not abundant, seemingly. Local Church caring teams therefore have an important role to play.

One area where the church is more directly involved with other caring efforts is in Hospice Care. Here, well trained volunteers in the local church can provide assistance to the critical hospice efforts and to the

individual in the last stage of his/her life journey. I will return to Hospice care later in this project.

Conclusion: The World Is Still Our Parish

Wholistic ministry examines the relational journey of human beings over their life spans. While the focus of wholistic ministry within the local church in this project is primarily centered in the life stages of individuals, the issues of the larger community cannot be ignored. Indeed, we are bound together by human experience; when we encounter human suffering or injustice, we are able to experience our own remembered moments of suffering. There is a longing for people to be set free.

Seeking fulfillment or wholeness is a human striving; we are in the parade together, encountering the results of disasters together; celebrating human achievements together; sharing skills and hobbies that give pleasure to ourselves, and can also be enjoyed by our friends and community; understanding that the losses all human beings suffer are similar to the losses we encounter ourselves. We have all been in pain together and know how important a helping hand or caring heart can be at the right moment in time.

The stress of modern living results from a myriad of sources, including economic, political, environmental and social. We do not need an economist to tell us that housing costs eat up increasing higher percentage of our income. Indeed, television commentaries regularly feature programs and articles on the tragedy of poverty especially among

young children in the United States today. Homelessness and hunger are evident not only on television, however; on a trip to the local shopping center one almost always sees one or more people, often families, standing beside large cardboard signs which read, "Will work for food."

Indeed, the pain that is remembered in one's personal life story is reentered as one enters the life story of one's neighbor who is hurting or broken. Responding to human need in specific, focused ways energizes us. It also fulfills. Those who respond to problems by becoming involved with alleviating those problems also become more optimistic about possible solutions in the future.

The church has a unique vision of care that always challenges people to look toward the future and to the hope that binds us uniquely as the pilgrim people of God. This is a hope often born at the edges of our society, in its painful places and in its painful stories.

Stories enable us to put our lives into a framework and to meaningfully integrate tougher parts of those journeys.

Sallie McFague describes it this way:

Why does everyone love a good story and how is story related to theological reflection? The answers to these two questions are, I believe, related. We all love a good story because of the basic narrative quality of human experience; in a sense, any story is about ourselves, and a good story is good precisely because somehow it rings true to human life. Human life is not marked by instantaneous rapture and easy solutions. Life is tough. That is hardly a novel thought, but it is nonetheless the backbone in a literal sense--the 'structure' of a good story. We recognize our own pilgrimages from here to there in a good story; we

feel its movement in our bones and know it is 'right'.... We love stories, then, because our lives are stories and we recognize in the attempts of others to move, temporally and painfully, our own story. We recognize in the stories of others' experiences of coming to belief our own agonizing journey and we rejoice in the companionship of those on the way.¹⁴

Life, indeed, seems a story of one's pilgrimage. Along the way the stories of others, their struggles met and goals achieved, helps us to discover how much we human beings have in common and how much we need each other.

¹⁴ Sallie McFague TeSelle, Speaking in Parables (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 138-39.

CHAPTER 2

The Story and Our Life Together

Stories of human journeys are interesting on many levels. People may identify with some of the problems and quests of other individuals and relate them to similar encounters they have had. People may seek for the same resolutions others found in their journey stories.

Narratives have a way of ordering not only our understanding of reality, but of relating to the encounters we have along the way, the quest nature that impels us forward, and our understanding what is normative. Our own sense of meaning is shaped through the form of telling stories.

Often as we listen to the stories of people at the boundaries, emerging realities also become visible and understandable. A narrative theology calls us to integrate new possibilities as we enter the stories of others.

What seems lacking in a culture and time of incredibly swift change is a commonly defined theology of care. As we listen for common themes of human stress or fear, we find we have had those same experiences ourselves. Mary Ella Stuart in her book To Bend Without Breaking uses a metaphor to describe her overcoming an emotional collapse, the image of a bonsai tree.¹ As she went for daily walks following

1 Mary Ella Stuart, To Bend Without Breaking (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977).

her collapse, she kept passing the bonsai tree that was carefully being stressed by the gardener at just the right places. Those specific stresses helped shape the tree into a thing of beauty.

The people of God believe that God shapes our lives at critical points, too, and further that God calls us to be a co-worker in God's vineyard. Life stories also reflect major pruning points, experiences of stress and new growth. Caring ministries teams can help those facing the stress of change, or even personal crises, by enabling them to touch the themes of their own lived stories, and value the lived stories of their contemporaries. Whether one sees a bonsai tree as one plant similar to many, or values the unique shaping and stress points in its development, one can appreciate the healing and see the caring hand of One who shapes, prunes and recreates our lives.

Stories on the Boundary

Paul Tillich described life as taking place on the boundary. Mary Elizabeth Moore describes Tillich's experience.

Many times he found himself living between two different realities...between city and country, Lutheranism and Socialism, church and society. On the boundary, Tillich formed his own life story and his theology. He often found himself drawn to stories in literature that portrayed a boundary situation.²

2 Mary Elizabeth Mullino-Moore, "Telling Stories and

Later, in that same work, Moore suggests how people might define themselves as they move into a new place.

When anyone lives such an on-the-boundary existence, new stories are likely to form in order to account for the new reality that is emerging. Stories not only help us cross boundaries, they also help us to live on the boundaries and create a place for ourselves in a strange land.³

Finally, she invites us to see that stories are not "kid's play" because they challenge, even threaten us with new realities: "Since stories function as symbols, they face us with decisions. Stories are not kid's play; they are dangerous. Then again, maybe they ARE kid's play because children are the only people who have the naivety, or spirit of adventure, or courage to face the decisions that are offered by stories."⁴

Serving on a peri-natal ethics committee opened my eyes to the vast potential of ethical issues facing the medical community. Fetal cell research, organ transplants for infants, "beings" born and surviving for hours after birth, raise not only incredible ethical dilemmas, but remind us of the leading edge of medical technologies. Where are our values? What is it to be human? Who decides?

Our lived story comes off the headlines of the evening

Crossing Boundaries," unpublished article, School of Theology at Claremont, 1989, n.p.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

paper. Each day, it seems, new chapters are being written. Today traditional values and boundaries of acceptability are regularly being pressed. The startling speed of our late twentieth century seems to challenge us at the boundaries of what used to be normative only yesterday.

Discerning wholistic ministry challenges the modern church to embrace the stories that are reshaping future boundaries and redefining our society and ourselves. In California, for example, we are told that by the year 2020 the white population will be less than 50 percent. Ethnic diversity enriches our social fabric, but creates stress too.

Those living on the margins of existence today might even be thought of as living on the boundaries of what has been taken to be normal, i.e., their story is not our story. The homosexual community, for example, faces difficult, even abusive challenges each day. At one time it was normal for the homosexual community to stay in the closet. Today greater acceptance of that life style, while not yet fully gained, seems to be emerging. Times are changing, and their story is becoming the next chapter of our story.

Communicating Through Story

In story or narrative we also discover a unique sense of time as it impacts our understanding of self. Story time allows one to envision disparate clues coming together under the wise scrutiny of one who makes connections that others miss, and points toward resolution. Story time does not

end, but often reflects lifetime experiences whose connections are revealed and redeemed, but never contained; one travels toward a climax, but not a final conclusion. In time, however, one moves toward becoming a more creative story teller, enriched by all that has enriched past stories. One learns to integrate liberating themes and symbols to express new life possibilities. The story transcends each one who speaks it to life, and yet, its form empowers one to journey again and again in hope of reaching new discoveries.

Stories are also a significant way of knowing. Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore notes recent works that highlight this reality. "The two natural modes of human thought, according to (Jerome) Bruner, are pragmatic thought (logico-scientific thinking that rests on description, explanation, and verification) and narrative thought that weaves together action and consciousness."⁵

As a preacher for nearly twenty-two years, I have come to value the power of words to communicate. Some sermons I delivered over those years were well structured, biblical research was done with care, and these were delivered with a fair amount of passion, I believe. Oddly, some of the most erudite and theologically sound sermons failed to make the desired impact. On the other hand, those quickly written,

⁵ Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, Teaching from the Heart: Theology and Educational Method (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 139.

reflecting on the week's newspaper headlines and personal experiences and woven together with the thoughts of an appropriate parable of Jesus, often brought comments of gratitude and affirmation that preachers recognize as hitting the mark.

A suggestion arising out of a preaching class with J. Irwin Trotter at the School of Theology at Claremont some years ago, led to an experiment. Let go of the traditional ways you structure your sermons -- you preachers are familiar with it -- three points and a poem, and tell a story, especially if that is the form of the biblical text being used.

I've always used stories during some part of the sermon but felt stories, especially personal ones, lacked scholarship. In fact, seminaries in the seventies discouraged too many personal examples. I've learned since that people are capable of integrating the principal of the story with similar life stories of their own, and that personal experiences are often as enriching as any examples from literature. Still, trying out story telling in the pulpit was an interesting experience.

I remember the day I was going to analyze the congregational response to the form of a story as the sermon was preached. The response was wonderful. At first I established what I wanted to tell them, and I made the point; there was a decent attention from the congregation. Now, I watched their eyes as I put down sermon notes and

began to tell the story that also contained the essence of what I wanted to impart. Almost immediately there was a response, more than eye contact. People were listening in a way that led me to know they were somehow weaving this story of the preacher into their own way of interpreting the human experience; their eyes were, indeed, as windows, and the eyes on that day were wide open. I believe they were "seeing" anew the light of the ancient story's truth. Insights are valuable whenever they are discovered; when a series of insights is connected in a story, interwoven and moving toward a completion, there exists an even greater wholeness. Those insights capture the imagination with lasting imprint.

Weaving Life Threads Through Story

Virgil Elizondo is an artist in the sense of using narrative to create a message that transcends his work. Elizondo uses autobiographical story as a dramatic art form in his book The Future is Mestizo. I read the book quickly and with great interest, and realized how much more was imparted than just the story of one person's life, as interesting as Elizondo's life itself was. His story was a spiritual journey, almost a parade, but also a story of spiritual transformation.⁶

Virgil Elizondo was born in San Antonio, Texas to a

⁶ Virgil Elizondo, The Future is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

Mexican family, living between two worlds, both cultural and geographical. This presented him with a unique perspective of envisioning a new humanity, a vision growing out of both faith and need. Interestingly, though clearly 'modern' in his Roman Catholic academic preparation (i.e., his training followed the normal track for all other Roman Catholic seminarians) his deeper mystic beliefs set him apart from most.⁷

Elizondo's commitment to the vision of our Lady of Guadalupe, coupled with his traditional religious training, helped shape his theology. Our Lady, as Elizondo relates to the historical appearance, brought together the natives of what we now recognize as Mexico and the descendants of the original Spanish invaders in a way that blended cultures and embraced a new people. According to Elizondo's thinking, it was this vision that healed the tension between those of cultural differences and transformed both into a new creation. This image of the Lady of Guadalupe and the ensuing stories developed around the vision, told and retold, empowered people to see new possibilities.⁸

Elizondo's ability to integrate narrative, social values and personal experience reflects his ability to present a relationship among ideas in proximity with one

7 Elizondo, 26.

8 Ibid., 59-60.

another, an approach that Mary Elizabeth Moore calls Gestalt method.

The Gestalt method is much used in education, but not often identified as such. The impact of Gestalt psychology is more often recognized in the counseling field, but....Basically, the gestalt approach presents many ideas in proximity to one another so that learners can put the ideas together in some sort of unity. The presentation does not follow a linear pattern toward a particular kind of unity, but sets forth a variety of images and concepts for learners to draw together. In that sense it is an organic method in which the learners are active in the web of relationship.⁹

Elizondo weaves several insights from his personal experiences into a fabric of meaning through telling his story. Behind the symbols of the story told are themes of liberation, racial tolerance, hope for the future, and an image of God's leadership redeeming history's folly. The relationship of disparate concepts are woven into a common story; learners may learn from one insight or another or from their relationship as a whole.

The story of Virgil Elizondo not only allows one to enter his story, but through the relationship of history and similar life experiences, older adults may be helped to integrate parts of their story and move toward their own future or calling; i.e., if one can see how the stresses of another's life produced growth, or liberation, one might incorporate a sense of hope from that individual. If another's life was successful because of those stresses, the

⁹ Moore, Teaching from the Heart, 61.

learner may learn to see his or her stresses as stepping stones to greater integration and fulfillment. Historical moments like the world wide depression of the 1930s, for example, made poverty an all too real lived experience for many who had not experienced poverty before. That very poverty, however, forced financially stressed people to enjoy each other's company, creating a social environment based on neighbors sharing what little they had with other neighbors. Indeed, that time was unique, but perhaps one of the more unifying times in our country's story.

Narratives have a way of helping one to enter not only a story, but a whole way of thinking. At the boundaries of what was once accepted as the norm, one begins to sense a tension, a tension that may become the basis for greater growth.

John Dominic Crossan, for example, has developed a narrative theology based on the power of stories to form and transform the world. Particularly insightful is Crossan's understanding of "social symbolic order" (a generally accepted way of understanding authority within a given society as defined by Rebecca Chopp).¹⁰ Crossan's intent is to begin to understand social movements. Crossan recognizes that traditionally accepted myths are often stereotypic and reflective of a certain historical

10 See Rebecca S. Chopp, The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God (New York: Crossroad Pub., 1991). Chopp points to the centrality of language grounded in dual, hierarchized oppositions ordered by gender.

perspective and way of organizing society. With time, such stereotypes are less accepted, some are debunked and some are subverted by parabolic stories. Movement, then, reflects a change in thinking about what was previously accepted as normative.¹¹

Before one can understand movement, one attempts to understand how society has generally ordered its values and realities. Visually one might think of the old western movies of the 1940s and 1950s in the United States. It was accepted and expected that the "good guys" wore white hats and ultimately would overcome the "bad guys" who wore black hats. Good overcoming evil in the end was an established fact, and viewers knew that fact before the plot was even developed if they were avid western fans. Crossan might refer to such an accepted reality as a myth, that form of a story which establishes the accepted world.

Interesting is Crossan's interpretation of parable as that which subverts the existing myth by its very form. Jesus, in telling parables subverts the myth almost in the beginning words: The Good Samaritan is an example of this (Luke 10:29-37). Not only was the title of the parable an oxymoron, but as the parable reveals its truth, the one who aids the helpless, wounded traveler comes to him as an outsider. The priest and levite normally expected to

11 Crossan, 47-62.

provide the right religious response, are too preoccupied by religious duty to help. By the end of the parable, those who were traditionalists were either angry or given a new insight into their need to be defined by existing myths. There were those, for example, who were able to discern truth in what Jesus was saying, as uncomfortable as it may have been to hear, and dared to do something about it. The cumulative effect of the radical carpenter from Nazareth disturbed the existing power structure in Jerusalem. Disturbing reports came from those who heard Jesus preach about his reinterpretation of the law, indeed, of God's will. Some, like Nicodemus, however, understood and dared to believe that the insights of Jesus, though they differed from his own long held beliefs, just might be true.

In our contemporary world, Rebecca Chopp and other feminist theologians speak to a similar need to challenge today's existing myths, which Chopp refers to as the social symbolic order -- a term she uses to describe a twentieth century, male dominated system of social ordering.¹²

Virgil Elizondo, not unlike the Samaritan, looked at the Texas social order both as an outsider (one whose family originated in Mexico) and, also, as one who had a vision of something that surpassed cultural differences; some healing of cultural biases seems possible for those who can discern

12 Chopp, 23-30.

a deeper human understanding. This way of cultural thinking and storytelling subverts the present social order and is thereby parabolic. Elizondo does this not by disparaging either culture, but by examining the unique stories of each, placing them in an historical perspective, and sensing where God seems to be moving God's people in this unique time and space, past the monuments of history. The story of Elizondo's life connects historically with many of us. Through entering his story, and especially some of the tragic-comedic interludes he weaves, one senses a movement toward some climax or resolution.

Elizondo's work can also be viewed as indirect communication filled with humor. Soren Kierkegaard was among the earlier philosophers to blend narrative form, theology, and humor. Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore describes his work: "This is the idea that story is a form of indirect communication that conveys truths that cannot be communicated directly....He also sought to develop a theory of humor, always searching for the comic dimension of the human contradiction."¹³

Elizondo's interlude, wherein he speaks of being raised in San Antonio during a time of racial segregation, gets at

13 Moore in Teaching from the Heart, referring to Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 141.

this kind of comic/tragic humor. He relates that as a Mexican-American he was always in-between; not quite Anglo, but neither was he "colored." He relates how serious was a lengthy sojourn into the city proper. Public bathrooms then had signs above them, Whites and Colored. He was not white, neither was he allowed to use the Colored toilets; quite a dilemma!¹⁴

Elizondo's autobiography is a social critique of American culture of his time and a prophetic insight of what might be. He wove stories out of the dim past before Mexico was, and saw the vision anew, a vision of what might yet be. He used the vision of the Lady of Guadalupe, his own cultural history, his understanding of people of Mexican descent living in twentieth-century San Antonio society, and his theological insights to create an artistic weaving of a story that seemed a joyous, celebrative parade led by God, the drum major supreme.

Stories as Bridge

The art form of a story becomes a bridge that connects ideas and practical experience resulting in an imaginative new landscape. Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore's image of a bridge as a means of connecting theological method and practical life situation focuses on differing methods of interpretation and reflection: case study, Gestalt, phenomenology, narrative method and conscientizing method.

14 Elizondo, 18.

Interpreting what is occurring in a specific context, reflecting theologically on that transaction and attempting to **interweave** differing perspectives coming from different landmarks is no easy task. Yet, this organic interweaving of ideas and life story allows one to embrace each unique human being's gift, and be gifted at the same time by his/her specific insights.

Teaching from the heart involves caring enough to listen and honor the other while moving from rigid ideas once fixed in time, using those new insights to inform our emerging theological perspective, or perhaps be transformed by them ourselves. Like all good weavers, Moore interweaves all methods with her own personal story which makes the design of the fabric clear against its many distinct threads.

Integrating how one believes the world should be and living in the context of a foreign place, as Moore relates, challenges one to integrate concepts previously held, and yet be informed by the social context.¹⁵ Reflection and contextual reality not only inform, but can transform a person's perspective. In a sense, a theology that seeks to bridge ontological and specific view points must be organic, having the capacity to interweave new ideas. One needs to, as Moore states, "include social analysis in the beginning

15 Moore, Teaching from the Heart, 27-58.

and throughout technological analysis" but also "test the adequacy of theological constructions in terms of how they affect human lives on earth."¹⁶

As Moore shared her experience living with a family from another nation, and reacting to their observations about American society, she could not separate her personal story from the scientist who listens objectively. While on one hand, she responded to the facticity of what was being said, on the other she responded with hurt born of human insensitivity. Listening to people involves not only scientific analysis of what is being said, but attention to the resonance with lived experiences of the hearers as well. Linear thinking moves one toward objective understanding, stories make understanding a life experience, and bridging the two leads to greater wholeness.

Quoting Sharon Welch's thoughts on the importance of beliefs grounded in life experiences, Moore notes that the problem of disembodied beliefs is more than emphasis.¹⁷ The question is whether ideas will be generalized in such a way that they do not speak to a concrete issue, or do not relate to what is observable in a specific life context

16 Ibid., 190.

17 Ibid., 191. These ideas are from Sharon Welch's book, Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), 6-7.

where ideas and conflicts are encountered. Moore cites Welch, who describes "the difference between a theology focused on ontology and the liberating attributes of God, and a theology focused on liberation actualized in history."¹⁸ Sometimes understanding God as a God who cares and liberates works as a concept, but doesn't live until it becomes a part of a more complete lived story.

Rebecca Chopp would agree, especially in the context of Latin America. She points toward Latin American theologians and notes the radical manner in which liberation theology offers a new paradigm for theology, as it focuses on suffering, transformation, and praxis (a praxis of solidarity with the poor). She says: "Liberation theology is necessarily a situated theology in which analysis of the particular socio-political situation is essential. All interpretation relates to a particular situation and yields liberative action for that situation."¹⁹ Moore's bridge image might be kept in mind as one tries to reflect theologically about movement between an ontological and a contextual matrix.

Some possess a poetic gift that serves as this bridge. A poetic vision enables them to symbolize events as they

18 Moore, Teaching from the Heart, 191.

19 Ibid., 192. These ideas are developed from Rebecca Chopp's book, The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 150-52.

occur, as portending what forces (God) may be behind and yet leading at the same time. An example of this might be how Virgil Elizondo works his poetic insight into the context of the liberation and visionary landscapes of his life's story. He speaks of a Saturday night parade culminating in the coronation of the new Miss San Antonio, but emphasizes that now the Miss San Antonio can be Hispanic. Something has changed, some hope is emerging as people move through time. Interestingly, he describes the parade as almost an Easter vigil. It is a parade held in the evening, where each in the procession carries a candle. But this is not a celebration of Easter; it is a celebration of a new time. This is a time when anyone can become Miss San Antonio, i.e., one no longer needs to be an Anglo to receive such honor. Here the parade (one in which Elizondo must have actually walked) represents a fixed moment in time, yet the time itself is moving toward some new human expression of liberation -- in this case an Hispanic woman becoming the representation of beauty, and the honored first lady of San Antonio.²⁰

One also has a sense of history being transcended as Elizondo describes the parade marching past the tombstones of the historic defenders of the Alamo. One might also see the parade representing a movement in time toward this new, liberating time which seems to be drawing the parade and all

20 Elizondo, 49.

of humanity forward.²¹

What Elizondo manages to do is to tell his personal story with ontological insight into God's leading of human beings in a march toward a new humanity, and, at the same time, contextual insight into the historical conflicts which are also being transformed. One might see those tombstones of the defenders of the Alamo representing landmarks on a historic journey whose final destination is known only by God. Clearly Elizondo emphasizes the movement of the parade as a movement toward a better day for humanity, while hinting that God sees the parade from beginning to end. He crafts this theological motif as he tells his unique story, selectively lifting out conclusions that he has integrated, and related to what he believes about God's intentionality.²²

Time here has a unique quality in that it is not measured chronologically, but is suspended as a measurement. One focuses on a new unification of many feelings, both past and present. As the parade of people move past the ancient landmarks, the contrasts are incredible, so is the image of the parade. It is a procession of people becoming more than they might have been -- a movement toward a new creation. A creation not only of individuals, but of a whole, new

21 Ibid., 50.

22 Ibid., 50.

society described as Mestizo.

The description of Elizondo's seems compatible with the description of concrescence in process theology--the process of the past coming together in a new way.

This is the process by which a new occasion or event emerges. All of the elements of past experience are brought into a unity in the becoming occasion, and the new occasion then becomes an element of experience for later occasions. Whitehead describes concrescence in this way: "The many become one and are increased by one." In a real sense, each movement of experience is a Gestalt (or unity) of experiences that have gone before.²³

In process thought, God is understood to be involved and active in every concrecing event, luring the emerging event toward the future.

Concrecence seems captured in the parade of people moving ahead in time, diverse feelings coming together as something new, moving toward actualization. As one reflects on the time in which we live--its excitement, its challenges to older, established structures -- one looks for hints that God is still "leading our parade" toward some future that only God knows completely.

If one can discern one's life as a parade of encounters, all of which might be seen as personal landmarks, perhaps this movement itself could add wholeness

23 Moore, Teaching from the Heart, 62. Here Moore draws on the thoughts of Alfred North Whitehead, Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology, corrected ed., eds. David R. Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 21.

to one's understanding of him/herself. If, as a people of faith, we held the perception that the changes we are encountering, even those that seem unhappy or hurtful, are somehow within God's intentionality and over all plan, those changes become more integrative. If one has an eye trained to look for hints, changes in the social ordering of things, even painful changes, may be seen as clues to a yet unrealized future. Something of the future hope is contained in moments that are uniquely alive and promising of something eternally good which lies ahead. Elizondo's experience walking in a parade that night lifted his spirit, but also empowered his faith to be more hopeful. It was only one parade, but it was a transformative moment.

Stories of Women as Challenge to Existing Structures

One of the most dramatic changes that seems to be portending a new future is the emerging role of women in leadership. As they march toward some newly defined place within this new time, their stories are heard with greater clarity and given attention they have not had before.

Maxine Glaz and Jeanne Stevenson Moessner in their book, Women in Travail and Transition, mark a cadence discerned through emerging and conflicting stories of women's often painful march toward liberation and wholeness.²⁴ In the introduction to that good book was a

24 Maxine Glaz and Jeanne Stevenson Moessner, eds., introduction to Women in Travail and Transition: A New Pastoral Care (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

suspended moment for me that embraced feelings of alienation and also compassion, held in tension and told in a brief story. The story's landmark was an actual occurrence.

The true story of June is an example of a failed moment in pastoral care. As with many of the accounts of women and their ministers in this book, better care could have been provided had the minister been available to the woman's experience. June, a mother for the first time, had a harrowing delivery: She nearly died in childbirth.

Exhausted and frightened, she lay awake in her hospital bed unable to close her eyes. She was glad that the birthing process finished, but the baby, she felt, had nearly killed her. When her pastor arrived, five hours had passed since the ordeal.

She could not bring herself to describe her feelings: the pastor, aware that she had been near death, did not enquire. Instead, after introductory talk, the pastor repeated how grateful to God she should be for the wonderful new life that had been entrusted to her. June felt even worse after the visit because one major part of her experience had not been acknowledged; the baby as threat to her own life.

June did not establish a nonambivalent relationship to her infant. In therapy years later, she concluded that the emotions formed at the birth and sealed inside by the pastor's oblivious remarks were a significant factor in her lack of bonding with her child. Because she could not bring herself to share her feelings, she felt victimized, increasingly guilty, and cornered as the mother of this child. The outcome of this, she surmised, was a troubled adolescent. June did, however, have two more children. Although she would not tell her husband the reason, she asked him to keep the minister away from her during her hospital stay at each birth. These two births were uncomplicated; June felt much better in her mothering of each. Because the youngest child seemed to do as well as her first child did poorly, June inferred that the minister's absence was far more helpful than his presence.

...Can a thirty minute pastoral visit have such reverberations for another when the unspoken cry of her plight is missed or ignored? June

thought so...²⁵

In the very week I had read the introductory chapter in Women in Travail and Transition, I went to visit a new mother in the hospital. The story of June's experience was still freshly disturbing. Because of this memory, however, I believe I was more prepared for what I next encountered.

The baby had been born by C-section; Mary was distant, yet not unhappy, it seemed. My natural inclination to congratulate her seemed wrong. Maybe it was her color, paler than I expected. Even the room was darkened by someone's choice of a low wattage fluorescent light against the green wall. Even the room seemed to create an uncertain mood.

Instead of focusing first on the baby, I asked, "How are you doing, Mary?" I can't be certain if there was relief in her next expression or if I felt good about not starting with congratulating her on bringing a beautiful new life into the world. She responded, "The baby's just fine, but things are not so certain for me," was her response. I was grateful for my hesitancy. Caring doesn't always focus in the right direction, but having read Moessner and Glaz's article, "One Failed Moment," was more than timely.

In the great scheme of things, maybe one encounter between a pastor and a person wounded by life's uncertainty makes little difference. But as one moment can change the

25 Ibid., 2.

future, perhaps the diverse and mixed feelings of that moment captured in a hospital maternity ward could give birth to similar unique moments for others. Maybe even in the scheme of things, the experience of "one failed moment" for one pastor births the possibilities of rebirth for someone else. Suspended moments in time bring memories of other moments, and in the interchange of remembered moments, and realized connections with other historic encounters, transformation is discernible.

The personal drive for wholeness and the movement of society toward greater openness are bound together in an era where women's voices are now being heard. In the midst of social and psychological voices, feminist theologians are also helping us re-vision the possibilities of the faith community, especially the church.

In an interesting chapter in her book The Power to Speak, Rebecca Chopp helps one to envision Jesus as opening the world to all people. Jesus relates the Isaiah text, recorded in Luke 4:18: "The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favor." In this proclamation was a momentous interlude in Jesus' ministry, signaling a dramatic revealing of God's intention to change the course of human events. Jesus was proclaiming a new day, a time of arrival for hearing afresh the liberating intent of God.

Chopp, correctly I think, captures the moment in which Jesus made this declaration as a landmark for his ministry. It was a moment to seize.²⁶

Chopp believes that now is the time to capture the freedom of those moments proclaimed in Luke's gospel, as we hear afresh the freedom emancipating women from stereotypic roles. Rather than seeing the Bible's story as an archetype fashioning the "right" social patterns, she argues for a Biblical understanding of a living, evolving, liberating Word--one open to change and committed to freedom, more a living Proclamation which would best be interpreted as prototypical.

All feminist discourse must approach the Bible with suspicion for its contents are not 'pure' discourses; the Scriptures themselves demonstrate the tragic distortion of speaking of freedom through the very different configuration of woman as less and 'other' than man....In this we follow Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's notion that Scripture should be treated as a structuring prototype and not as an eternal archetype.²⁷

What is being challenged here is the very foundation of the social, symbolic world, our way of giving words or names for reality. One might think of how easy it becomes to think of God as Father when there is no alternative word used to describe God. Again, one might think of the traditional family, i.e., father, mother and children as being normative

26 Chopp, 47.

27 Ibid., 42.

because that construct has become well known and accepted. The social symbolic order assumes a male dominated culture and has, until very recently, reinforced that accepted order through the use of predominantly male oriented language. Restrictive, oppressive and stereotypic language prevents acceptance of those who do not fit that social ordering. "Proclamation in feminist discourses of emancipatory transformation resists and transforms the social order."²⁸

In the community who hears this good news, in this particular space and time, the old order is ruptured:

Is this not the vision of Luke's proclamation: the community who gathers in God's time and space, time of fullness, connection, and rupture, in spaces of solidarity, intersubjectivity and possibility? ...the church as embodied relations of emancipatory transformation depends not upon placing women on the margins, but on being a gathered assembly which lives thorough nurturing and celebrating values of difference, specificity, embodiment, solidarity, anticipation and transformation.²⁹

Especially interesting is Chopp's analysis of how we figure language; she chooses impactful words to make her point about the results of such configuration.

Yet another way to cast analysis of modernity is to consider the deceitful figuration of its major metaphors and tropes; mastery, success, presence, autonomy, and progress. Ways of speaking have been structured into ways of acting and vice versa; ways of being in the world have developed out of and in constant close

28 Ibid., 68.

29 Ibid., 72.

relation to ways of speaking....³⁰

As Chopp analyzes the language currently used to mark our arrival at this stage of the modern age, most of the words she uses, with much accuracy I think, are either violent or negative or both. "How are we to characterize, to describe, no matter how partially, the world in which we live? Death, control, destruction, deviance, force, manipulation, murder. These terms, these words, label the end of the modern era, the era of freedom, progress and reason."³¹

Chopp seeks a transformation that language sometimes conceals. Emancipation and transformation of the existing order of things will also require us to change our use of words in tandem with creating new images that are associated with liberation, nurturing, and more wholistic language.

Transformative Moments in Story

Every novel has a major climax, perhaps several smaller ones leading toward it and additional ones after it has been reached. Certainly the moment in which Jesus declared himself the fulfillment of the Prophets' promise was one of those moments. The scene of Luke 4 needs to be reentered to understand how this moment impacted all that followed. It was a scene immediately after Jesus' baptism and his temptation in the desert. It is, if not the first, among the

30 Ibid., 93.

31 Ibid., 101.

very first moments where he publicly declares himself to be the One who will bring about the new order the prophets foretold. This day these words have been fulfilled (Luke 4:21). This day, this moment, in my reading, the words have come to pass.

Many people will focus on specific words of Jesus to meet their needs. As we reflect on his life, words and ministry, all time is revalued for those who were previously imprisoned by fear or doubt or slavery of any kind. The open word of God, Jesus declares in these very words from Luke, is that God cares deeply about the creation and wills for it to be free and whole and healthy. When God speaks so lovingly in Jesus Christ, those who have ears to hear desire to apply that loving attitude and desire for emancipation to the world they encounter.

In a moment of historic time--in the event of Jesus--something unique occurred, and all of time thereafter was transformed by the word issuing from that moment itself. The term "Kairos" emerges as a way of envisioning time and caring coming together in wholeness, which enables one to see and value things differently. Chronological time usually measures events of a society's political, nationalistic achievements. It dates momentous discoveries, but usually doesn't deal with emotions or dreams or passions of common people. Feats and achievements, like proof and production, are about what occurred and when, not so much

about what people have felt or what motivated or enabled them to dream new dreams.

Kairos time, on the other hand, permits one to consider a possible redefining of purpose or intent, to examine feelings and dreams, and to believe they have value and meaning. Poetically Rebecca Chopp relates to the theological imaging of time that is associated with Frederich Schleiermacher:

Within this pulsating temporality, with both its discomfort and its assurance, the borders of self are blurred, fused, confused, yet the coming to be of the self cries, sings. This is pointed to in Frederich Schleiermacher's configuration of the relation of God's providence to the feeling of absolutely dependence: The temporality of being absolutely dependent must be of a cosmic connection that is always coming to be....The Sabbath, in which Jesus comes, is cosmic time, the connectedness of time and proclamation, the time known within the heart and soul, time of ceaseless rhythm cascading into freedom for all connectedness of God and the world.³²

This Kairos time is suspended time, in which new possibilities are opened; and dreams are dreamt again and hopes are once more rekindled.

Chopp captures the moment of personal empowerment in which Jesus declares the importance of transformation for all people. The inclusive nature is not gender specific, it is for those who hear and see. God has spoken in Jesus Christ. In Christ we are free to speak!

32 Chopp, 49.

Seeing New Paradigms in Old Stories

Our modern day social-symbolic order has clearly oppressed women. Their stories of marginalization, rejection and dehumanization are lived out in a society that needs to frame a different story.

Rather than trying to use the old social-symbolic order of authority and dominance, i.e., replacing women in men's traditional, hierarchical positions of management, but not addressing the order itself, Jeanne Moessner creates a new relational paradigm in the context of pastoral care. Not so ironically, she too uses the parable as the form which subverts the established myth, the parable of the Good Samaritan.³³

Is it possible to understand the Good Samaritan's generosity differently? Is it possible for one to pay for one's neighbor in need, without totally exhausting one's resources? Must one be totally subservient to serve? Can one see in the model of the Samaritan's caring and compassion a greater desire to share one's resources without completely depleting them? The image of woman as care-giver in our society has also been equated with self-surrender. What if caring could be elevated so that it could be seen as empowering others without diminishing one's self?

³³ Jeanne Stevenson Moessner, "A New Pastoral Paradigm and Practice," in Women in Travail and Transition: A New Pastoral Care, eds. Maxine Glaz and Jeanne Stevenson Moessner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 203.

Conclusion

Stories have the unique capacity to challenge our way of defining ourselves. They enable us to enter new worlds by crossing boundaries into someone else's world. Fantasy is kid's play, it enables new visions, but threatens our more recognized, accepted worlds. Stories help us both to find ourselves in our stories and to find ourselves in others. As we hear other's stories, we recognize that all persons have a boundary that defines who they are, but boundaries can be crossed. Caring groups in local churches can discern the boundaries of fear that restrain people, but they can also draw on stories of faith that enabled our forebears to cross boundaries because they trusted in God's call.

Communicating through story helps us to connect with another way of knowing. While many appreciate logic and deduction (and a technological society certainly depends upon this way of knowing), there is yet another way. Communicating an idea through a story helps one to connect ideas or insights as they integrate together. Success in life may not always be equated with understanding computers or even programming a VCR. Success may be discovered as one finds her/his own place in life and there finds completion.

Importantly, social critique can be communicated through weaving life experiences within a historical or social context. Virgil Elizondo's capacity to weave his personal life story with a grasp of God's transforming spirit enables hearers to weave lessons they have learned

over their own life times. Often the most enriching of life's experiences have occurred as accepted racial or social barriers have shifted from being seen as normative to being seen as immoral, or not in tune with God's purposes. Weaving personal experiences within an historical and cultural matrix, and seeing those stories change within a new historical horizon, enables one to see threads of truth woven together into a diverse, beautiful tapestry.

Caring groups can enable people to relive historical moments in which they participated and integrate the historical movements into their own stories. Awareness of such connections will enable one to become a part of his/her own parade moving toward some ultimate life fulfillment.

Stories serve as a bridge between ideas and lived realities (praxis). It is one thing to speak of God's love and desire for liberation; it is another to see how this is reflected in daily practice. In the context of Latin American liberation theology, for example, this sense of belief and practice is visible as liberation itself becomes the motive for social action.

Some of the most humbling and transforming stories are being heard from women daring to speak their words of hurt and abuse. Their words are clearly beyond physical wounds. A long way lies ahead before the social symbolic order removes stereotypic acceptance of male dominance. Listening and caring may not change our world overnight, but the voices of story can speed the process.

Rebecca Chopp, among others, is leading the way in helping the church to think about models of transformation. Her focus on Jesus's stepping forward at a particular moment in time to proclaim a message of emancipation challenges us to rethink just what Jesus might have been doing. The Church has chosen to build its story on an understanding of ministry based on a male dominated archetype. Moving from archetype to prototype may free us to see how the old story might free people, rather than limit or narrowly direct them. Enabling people to see possibilities for a future is a challenge to any local caring ministries team.

Jesus' proclamation of fulfilling the scriptures in the very day he spoke them must have shocked his initial hearers as brash. In fact, every incident in Jesus' life reveals a liberating, wonder filled moment. Those who understand and look for the sacred seem to connect those moments more fully than those who never seek the sacred. In every marriage, in every baptism, in every funeral, the promise hope comes alive again. A Kairos moment celebrates the fleeting glimpses of God's love made real. Caring teams celebrate the moments as transforming moments in our common story.

Finally, new stories help us to expand old story's truths with deeper insight. Women who live life at the boundaries or in settings of abuse bring insights from their stresses. These insights need to be spoken to life that the limited horizons of others can be expanded. Sometimes we

don't even know we wear blinders until someone demands we remove them.

As Virgil Elizondo captured a vision of people moving in a parade toward a dramatic new future, so hopefully, we too can learn to trust God's guidance to lead us into a new time--one in which all barriers that divide and belittle our humanity will be torn down--when the oppressed will finally claim their freedom and when weapons of war and hatred will have become museum symbols that no longer have power in people's lives.

CHAPTER 3

Companions on the Journey

For all talk of aging as wholeness, there is one central reality one cannot deny--aging brings physical deterioration and, in the last quarter of our lives, frailty and ultimately death.

This section of the project examines the final journey of life--the journey toward death and beyond. While some deaths are, of course, sudden, many are not. Cancer, for example, is a disease that often allows for a certain amount of time to finish one's business, or to complete one's story. It is an emotional time of distress and often pain. Many of us know this time too well. Yet, it is also a sacred time, and for those allowed to accompany people through it, it is a privilege, a hard privilege.

This chapter examines the Hospice model of care as it impacts those who are terminally ill, their families and the care providers themselves. Few opportunities offer so rich an opportunity for vulnerable caring as those moments shared on the final journey. Often families in emotional distress find offers of assistance deeply welcome, too. While terminal illness is proportionally more frequently found among older adults, attentiveness must be paid to those who are dying despite their age.

Caring groups may be among the best prepared to

deal with such emotional distress and the most equipped to respond to specific requests for help.

The Hospice Model

In the introduction I mentioned that the hospice team model is one that local church caring ministries teams can well look to for guidance. While there are many similarities, and I will attend to these, there are also dissimilarities, largely because caring ministries teams are not medically oriented. Still the comparisons made will enable many groups who seek to establish a Caring Ministries team to envision a framework for ministry.

Sandol Stoddard, in her book The Hospice Movement, sets a historical stage for understanding the ministry of Hospice in its earliest settings. The Knights Hospitallers of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem were those charged with caring for the wounded and dying traveling back and forth from the Crusades during the twelfth century. Their charge was to make the wounded as comfortable as possible, taking less concern for their own needs than for those calling for help. Interesting were the guidelines for care:

How our Lords the Sick Should be Received and Served: When the sick man shall come . . . each day before the brethren go to eat, let him be refreshed with food charitably according to the ability of the house.

The beds of the sick should be made as long as broad as is most convenient for repose, and each bed should be covered with its own coverlet . . . and each bed should have its own special sheets .

Little cradles should be made for the babies of women pilgrims born in the house

The Commanders of the houses should serve the sick cheerfully, and should do their duty by them, and serve them without grumbling or complaining

Moreover, guarding and watching them day and night . . . nine serjeants should be kept at their service, who should wash their feet gently, and change their sheets. . . .¹

Stoddard, in her initial chapter, focuses on the differences between a modern hospital with its sterile needles and doctors and nurses in formal attire, creating a sense of almost war rather than love.

It is a strange embrace, the one we now find welcoming us into the place we call hospital. It is one which neutralizes instantly whatever life force makes each one of us into a unique individual. Hospital welcomes my body as so many pounds of meat, filled with potentially interesting mechanical parts and neurochemical combinations. Hospital strips me of all personal privacy, of all sensual pleasure of every joy the soul finds delight in; and at the same time, seizes me in the intimacy of a total embrace. Hospital makes war not love.²

It is in returning to the original concept of providing care with dignity that the modern hospice movement captures the heart and mind of its modern day adherents. Much credit is given to Dr. Cicely Saunders of St. Christopher's Hospital in London for bringing hospice care into the twentieth century. Surprisingly, the modern hospice movement seems to

¹ Sandol Stoddard, The Hospice Movement: A Better Way of Caring for the Dying (New York: Vantage Books, 1978), 12-13.

² Ibid., 3.

have begun here in the 1960s with this deeply caring Christian physician. Her desire to attend to people who are dying with personal attention and deep caring has inspired many other hospice programs. The earliest of them in the United States was started in Marin County, California in 1976.

While many hospice programs are offered through hospitals, and sometimes separate buildings are set aside for dying patients to provide for this unique kind of caring, many hospice programs are community based, and seek to provide hospice care in the home.

Hospice care, apart from the kind of unique nursing and medical care provided in a hospital or specially designated building for dying patients, helps one to focus on a specific kind of care treatment program. This care is provided for human beings who are thought to have a relatively short time to live, and for whom there appears no hope of remission or cure. Its purpose is to allow people to live with dignity and comfort as much as possible, and to allow for family and caring friends to participate in the care itself. While medical teams take care of the medical regime and social workers attend to financial and other kinds of in-home care, the family members are actively encouraged to participate in the patient's care too.

Apart from the home setting, those within the hospice team work together to minister to the needs of the dying patient. These groups often meet monthly or more frequently

in specially designated patient care sessions and try to improve both the patient's care regime and deal with their own needs in ministering to the dying person they have grown to know intimately. Minister is not a poor choice of words; it is in fact, the best possible choice. Teams, composed of doctors and nurses, social workers, chaplains and volunteers specifically trained in hospice care, can provide a deeply caring and touching ministry to one in the last stages of his or her life; a deep caring which can perhaps best be described as sacred.

Henri Nouwen has a wonderful thought to keep in mind as one tries to understand the challenge accepted by those charged with the care of these special patients: "The healer has to keep striving for . . . the space . . . in which healer and patient can reach out to each other as travelers sharing the same broken human condition."³

Good hospice programs provide specific training for those who are volunteers within this kind of ministry. Within the training, individuals learn how to deal with the physical needs of the patient, but also to deal with their own emotional bonding, stresses which will occur, and death itself. Beyond death, for the hospice team, is also participation at the funeral or memorial service and then follow-up. Finally, many hospices offer bereavement support

³ Henri Nouwen, Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), 65.

groups for the survivors. The groups have trained facilitators who also monitor the participant's progress toward wholeness.

Within the cross-disciplinary teams, usually assigned to several patients, and usually working in the same team, a deeper commitment exists than one might imagine. Bonds are naturally formed as one grows intimately tied to one whose life will soon end. The desire is to make the patient as physically comfortable as possible; to monitor his or her medical and emotional health and prepare for the patient's death. It is not always a difficult job to care for the body, but the bonds of intimacy become deep. These deeply felt emotions must find a place to express themselves. In hospice care, team members, especially medical team members, often shed tears, experience burn out, and feel sadness. The team members need to take time to care for themselves and be showered with the support of the team, family and friends as they experience the death of a friend. But people also experience great human fulfillment.

Caring Ministry Teams

Caring Ministries teams share much in common with hospice teams both in the bonding that occurs and in the pain of stress. Sometimes the stress that occurs within the caring team is a problem in itself.

Sometimes volunteers have a difficult time setting limits as close bonds are formed. At times they may

experience guilt for not doing as much as they would like, but they also experience control issues that need to be confronted. Often people feel compelled to do something for someone when others might willingly share that burden. Helping members to realize they need to back off from time to time for their own health is critical.

More than the normal group dynamic exists. As caring ministries team members become intimately involved with people's lives, each comes to feel responsible for that one individual's needs. Such bonding within a caring ministries team is generally good, but needs to be watched.

Sometimes even the most compassionate of people create a sense that no one is able to do the job that I alone can do. Not only is this untrue, but eventually it becomes a problem. Caring ministries teams need to define limits of involvement very early. These limits may help protect members from burn out, but also from becoming involved with control issues.

A control issue might be one in which the group realizes that it has too much work to do, but feels that it simply cannot allow others to become involved with their task. It becomes a privatized ministry instead of a ministry of the Church.

It is good to keep in mind that it is an important ministry of the Church for caring ministries team members to become teachers for others who would also like to become involved. This transition is not easy, but is the technique

of most organizations seeking to expand care to greater numbers and provide consistent quality service.

Still, the hospice team concept is wonderful in its supportive, compassionate and wholistic structure. Commitment to the team and the hospice concept enables one to examine the needs of several individuals at the same time, offer some valuable insight into specific need areas, and also find personal support and nurture. Care givers need to be care receivers as well. The caring ministries teams needs to be ever vigilant to attend to the stresses and issues within the team. If the team itself is not healthy, the ministry to others will suffer.

When Anxieties and Questions Arise

Not all ministry to the terminally ill will be with older people. Dealing with emotional stresses when the terminally ill are children or young adults brings added emotional duress. When dealing with people with AIDS, the issues concerning sexuality, lifestyles, transmission, and acceptance of the individual enter into the equation of issues related to dying. People dying with AIDS are often looked at as the lepers of the twentieth century.

One of the ways children communicate is through drawing pictures. Kubler-Ross emphasizes that such nonverbal communication helps others interpret their own feelings as well as their needs. If we look at the drawings as the children's internal pictures of themselves and their

diseases, we will find expressions of emotion, fears, questions and/or knowledge of the disease process. Through this artwork care-providers are able to address unmet needs, questions and offer the support through a frightening stage of life.⁴

Although the age level changes, the needs for expression and support are still an important part of life for people living and dying from AIDS. We can see examples of the works of people living with AIDS at galleries, conferences, i.e., the National HIV Conference held in San Francisco in each of the last four years. We find poems, photos and artwork that walk us through the emotions and knowledge of AIDS.

In a survey done with nursing staff providing care for AIDS patients, the social stigma of AIDS became apparent. Described as homophobia among physicians and nurses, the results of the survey indicated clear bias against patients with AIDS. These results showed that nurses and physicians fell into what is referred to as the low grade for homophobia.⁵ It is because of this type of attitude

4 Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, On Children and Death (New York: Collier Books, 1983), 115-44.

5 Elizabeth A. Klonoff and Deborah Ewers, "Care of Patients as a Source of Stress", AIDS Education and Prevention 2, no. 4 (1990): 339.

that the homosexual population developed support groups, places for people to go and talk (e.g., the Living Room), and care providers that focus on AIDS patients (e.g., Shanti Project and Kairos in Oakland).

Unlike clients diagnosed with cancer, family members of AIDS patients may learn new facets of a family member's lifestyle and sexuality that they may not have previously known. When the family member with AIDS comes home for care or support through this stage of his/her life, there is a lot of emotional baggage that needs to be dealt with before the supportive environment is present. Caring Ministries team members and Hospice teams need to examine their personal feelings about these issues in an openly caring atmosphere before they can minister to the person dying with AIDS. The important issue is that this person is a child of God; as Jesus opened his heart and used his healing powers to help the needy, so can we.

One of the more valuable helps in ministering to those with AIDS comes from Stephen Levine's book Healing Into Life and Death. In his chapter on healing, he helps his client go through a process of healing--a healing not of the body, but of the emotions.⁶ Such understanding of the issues of guilt, shame and rejection might help those dying with AIDS to do so with a greater sense of wholeness, but it can also give caregivers an insight into the emotional distress being

⁶ Stephen Levine, Healing Into Life and Death (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 89.

experienced by the patients themselves.

Death, A Final Stage of Life

Hospice training provides for issues like confidentiality and acceptance of death. It also enables people to learn what other services are offered, and what kinds of things other people have tried. Importantly, questions from potential care providers can be asked and individuals can hear differing concerns expressed. There is also a group of individuals overseeing those who would volunteer to serve, who insure that volunteers are not transferring some of their own fears, e.g. of death, to hospice care for another person. This screening is obviously necessary.

Acceptance of death is no easy matter, especially if you are the patient! In a sense, both the caring ministries team and the patient him/herself move toward the acceptance of death together.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross is the most commonly accepted name in understanding the transactions which occur during the final stages of life. While her books focus on death and dying, most of her work can be interpreted as relevant to those who are not dying, but dealing with losses of any sort.

While she is credited with identifying visible stages of death and dying, she cautions that the stages are not sequential. Those stages are denial, anger, bargaining,

depression and acceptance.⁷ If one thinks of a loss one encounters, one can see how these stages are encountered.

Caring ministries teams may have little or no training in understanding issues related to death and/or dying. A class on this topic is often helpful and often more appealing to a broad base community response than one might anticipate. Generally there are hospice individuals who are competent to teach such classes, but a phone call to the County Public Health Department would suggest possible resource speakers if Hospice is not functioning within one's community. Pastors are often trained in pastoral counseling and may or may not be comfortable dealing with death. Their experience with death and funerals, however, is an important part of such training. Often people are uncertain about how funerals work, what are the costs of a funeral, etc.

While caring ministries teams may feel comfortable providing important trips to the doctor, even for radiation and other related cancer treatments, the journey toward death is uncomfortable and very stressful. Yet, there is a richness to this journey that is deeply fulfilling.

Often the team members provide respite care for the family members. Respite care is a brief interlude within the day or night that allows the spouse of a family member who is terminally ill to get out of the house to do routine

7 See Kubler-Ross, On Death and Dying.

chores, or just get away. Such respite care is critical to the care providers and often allows them to return feeling that they are not facing this time all alone. Importantly, a bond is formed between those providing help of any kind and family members or other care providers who may feel a need to talk.

Being able to communicate with the dying patient is important, but not always in the way one thinks. Often no words are necessary at all, just presence and touching. Fantasies still exist about contagion, and these prevent some from nurturing their old friendships. Sometimes patients feel their friends no longer want to see them. Isolation and even desertion are uncomfortable realities for some. More commonly, however, there is distancing as people try to cope with loss and the fear of letting go at the same time. Still, remembering the past, celebrating unique moments of one's personal journey, and even moments of laughter are possible with the patient during this time. It is also a time when unfinished business can be finished. People often find that this is a time to give away special pieces of furniture or family history to specific individuals. Often a special moment of meaning will be shared as the patient explains why he/she chose this particular item to give to a specific person. Especially important, this is a time to say one's good-byes, heal wounds that may still be festering, and say things that one longs to say.

Often caring ministry team members can facilitate communication between family members too. This time indeed is precious time, caring time, a time out of time; it is Kairos time.

Hospice care nurtures an understanding of Kairos time; a unique fullness of time within a brevity of time; a caring time, full and intense and deeply felt and appreciated; it is holy time in the midst of ordinary time. In a paradoxical way that makes sense to the Christian community, it is also a celebrative time as one prepares for what lies ahead and one's ultimate encounter with God. It is a time of prayer, looking deeply into each other's eyes, celebrating memories and inviting God into this final journey as the One who knows the way Home.

Though it is the most profound of sacred times, it is not detached from all that has gone before. Indeed all that has gone before is reclaimed and longs to be reencountered one more time. One of the most beautiful parts of hospice care is that it takes place within the home where one's personal history is alive in one's pictures, choice of furniture, even a patch work quilt that some distant family member may have crafted. These personal items are still touchable and bring to the surface memories and unique moments in one's life that helped to shape values and choices.

Caring team members might find special tastes or even little gifts that are unique to that individual's sense of self. In team sessions, discussing the memories of the

dying patient and his/her values helps individuals to celebrate what is important within their own lives too. One of the more interesting things we've discovered is how similar is the journey individuals face. Not only is the response to chemotherapy and radiation predictable, but emotional responses, fears and hopes seem to follow the trajectory Kubler-Ross outlines on a fairly regular basis. What is important, however, is not that Kubler-Ross's stages are reaffirmed, but that the team is responsive and caring to the other care providers, e.g., the family and close friends, so that these people can also find energy for the journey with those in need.

Sometimes there are hurts that need healing, or spiritual stresses that require solace for both patients and team members themselves. Clergy can provide assurance in these moments, helping to lead team members and patients into a deeper affirmation of faith. Clergy are often especially important in comforting the dying ones as they seek to deal with deeply held fears or regrets. No communion is more holy than that communion which may be given for the last time. It is a time to recall the centrality of forgiveness that brought the Divine into human history. It is a time to bring the hands of Christ to touch our human fears--it is Kairos time.

It is also a time in which the patient seeks to reaffirm that his/her life has had meaning and value. While one cannot give meaning to someone else, one can find where

that individual found richness in past experiences. Often what made them feel uniquely alive, or brought laughter and wholeness in the past, is a recurring theme in their lived journeys. In revisiting some of these past experiences and reflecting upon them, what often occurs is a valuing of all time and existence. Described and relived moments recapture the sacred moments of the past. Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel has a poetic way of describing this sense of time's sacredness. His words were intended for those who are elderly and reflecting on their past journeys, but his choice of words also embraces the sanctity of time for all of us, especially those for whom time on this earth is limited. Heschel says that

[m]ost of us really do not live in the moment but seem to run away from it; we see not its face, but its makeup. The past is not remembered but often preserved as a cliche, and the present moment is either bartered or beclouded by false anticipations. The present moment is a zero, and so is that next moment, and a vast stretch of life turns out to be a series of zeros, with no real number in front. Blind to the marvel of the present moment, we live with memories.⁸

With the brevity of time, those who are dying live for each moment. Those who enter those unique moments often encounter people more alive and grateful than many with much

⁸ Abraham J. Heschel, "Religion and Aging in Contemporary Theology," Aging and the Human Spirit, eds. Carol LeFevre and Perry LeFevre (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1981), 41-42.

longer life expectancies. Time, indeed, is sacred, and those who enter this time with the dying walk on sacred ground.

The Hospice team rarely does funerals, but sometimes participates in them, especially in memorial services. Special support groups for the AIDS patients have regularly assisted with memorial services. Here the caring ministries team may have an even more visible and central role than the Hospice team would. Sometimes those who die are separated in time and distance from all of their relatives. Assisting within the earliest moments of death may well be the province of a caring ministries team member.

Recently a husband and wife moved to our community from their New Jersey home to assist their daughter (undergoing therapy from the results of a tragic accident that left her in a wheel chair). Here, Ed discovered he had prostate cancer and died rather quickly.

Since all of Ed's other friends and relatives were in New Jersey, Ed's wife Jan had to deal for the first time in her life with the little details surrounding death and the related funeral experience. The pastor was able to arrive early on the morning of death; he phoned the funeral director still at his own home and made arrangements for the body's removal even though no previous arrangements had been made. Other members from the church had arrived moments before the pastor, who arrived at 6:30 a.m.

The Caring Ministries team members were the only ones who had made any real contact with Ed and Jan during these months, due mostly to their health and family related stresses.

When it came time for the funeral, flowers came from the team. The reception at the Church was hosted by the team (who also gathered the food together), and specific family transportation needs were provided. None of these services by themselves would be particularly unique; that Ed died on the Saturday following Thanksgiving made it unusual to say the least!

While in this case family was present, there may be times when very few can actually attend any kind of funeral or memorial service. At these times, members of the Caring Ministries team may actually participate in holding the memorial services themselves, and perhaps, in large part for themselves, participating in the eulogy, etc.

The late twentieth century is a time when individuals are separated, if not in distance, often in space. Family members, especially distant family members, often cannot make funeral arrangements, and they are likely not to be familiar with local community possibilities for receptions and other matters. Here caring ministries teams can be of significant assistance. In a sense, the team is like a member of the family. Receptions either within the home or perhaps at the Church represent the beginning of the healing

process. Obviously it is a time of grief, but it is the beginning of a healing time too, a time of bereavement.

While bereavement groups are more common now than in earlier times, formal bereavement groups are fairly rare. Caring ministry teams in local churches, with the help from a local hospice unit or funeral director, can establish bereavement groups. The ministry expressed in such groups is one that allows individuals to begin the process of reintegrating. It is a time in which the deceased is remembered and honored, not forgotten. It is a time where memories change or need to be changed in order to move on. Sometimes there is a very unhealthy response to death, such as when the surviving spouse sees or hears the deceased over a long period of time. Obviously, it is a stressful time, and people need to discuss their feelings and losses with those who can listen in a caring, understanding way.

Such bereavement ministry is best done on an organized basis. Hospice groups, for example, include training for bereavement helping those within the groups to anticipate general reactions. While support is the primary intent of such groups, one might also detect in these settings signs of concern for individuals who may need specific counseling for unresolved grief. Through such groups one makes contact with others who have lost loved ones recently. These can share their experiences and find supportive responses, such as hugs. When bereavement groups are not available or desirable, those in caring ministries teams can be vigilant

to make sure that continuing calls or visits are made to assist in this difficult time of reentry.

Again, local hospice teams often provide for such initial bereavement groups; sometimes a local funeral home is willing to pay for this service as a part of their ministry to the community. While bereavement is a process, people can be helped to recognize healthy versus unhealthy responses. A large part of the healing process is sharing with individuals who have also recently lost loved ones. Caring ministries teams can evaluate what services are available at moments like this, evaluate what is needed, and perhaps make suggestions. Caring ministries could also develop classes on "Death and Dying" which includes a bereavement program.

Finally, within most churches, a memorial committee or process exists through which memorial gifts can be received and designated for particular purposes that may enhance ministry. Caring ministry team members might participate in the dedication service for such gifts, or at some sort of reception that follows. The team members keep track of the on-going bereavement and can report on the process. Calls made on those who have lost loved ones are particularly important in the days and weeks after family members have returned to their various homes. It is often after the memorial service reception that a caring ministries team can see a connected flow of lived moments in its relationship to the individual who has died and his/her family.

While caring ministry teams within the local church may not be trained as hospice volunteers are, they can use many of the lessons learned from that well defined compassionate Hospice ministry to inform their own structures. Hopefully, Hospice teams will make themselves available to those in need, but where hospice is not available, or for some reason not desirable, caring ministries teams might significantly fill in the gaps by attending to identified stages of loss.

Understanding the journey of one's life, especially the last stages of the journey, can be especially meaningful for those willing and able to serve. Unique moments in one's life seem to be relived and reconnected with a sense of fulfillment during this time; one's life story is being reconstructed in a sense. Those allowed to journey within this time learn to journey within sacred time and space. One is enabled to live moments more fully than ever before, and anticipate the value that the dying give to those moments.

Conclusion

Given the realities of the modern world, family members may not be able to provide the kind of response to death that would have been expected in an earlier time. Our modern era has often separated families by many miles. Often the visits people intended to make were frustrated by the sheer time restraints required for longer journeys. Often adult children depend on those who are local to help make funeral arrangements.

Caring ministries teams often step in where family members are absent, though attentiveness to particular needs of children with terminal illness will likely be beyond the scope of the lay caring team. Still this team may be all there is. Kubler-Ross has several books that are helpful.⁷ Dealing with AIDS is a more complex and deeply troubling concern. Again, caring ministries teams might be instrumental in developing workshops or educational experiences to deal with AIDS as well as homophobic issues.

Even suggestions about funerals and memorial services, as common as they seem to some, are new territory for many. Those who are able and willing to step in at a time like this earn the deepest appreciation from those who feel themselves in unchartered waters.

The bereavement support that should follow a death is critical. Here again, survivors can be guided to participate in an experience that is strange to them. Someone familiar and caring enough to talk through sequential steps in dealing with loss provides a linkage with the past, present and we hope, the future. The Caring Ministries team, in its monitoring and supportive response to those suffering grief during this time are engaged in one of their most valuable and respected ministries.

⁷ Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, is a medical doctor, a psychiatrist, and known thanatologist. Her books include: On Death and Dying; Living With Death and Dying, (New York: Macmillan, 1981). Questions and Answers on Death and Dying (New York: Macmillan, 1974); and On Children and Death.

CHAPTER 4

Moments of Meaning and Discovery

Since man is a creature who lives in a meaningful world rather than a bare event and a mere energy exchange, since he lives in a meaningful time in chronological time, maybe this is your most important life world.¹

The world in which we live is in a constant state of change. Futurist Alvin Toffler described the successful person in this kind of world as one who will be able not only to move within change, but will be able to thrive on change itself.² This person, who embraces each new day with confidence and anticipation, is also one who needs some things that are less changing. As successful as he or she may be at coping with a modern world of rapid change, likely he/she needs to come home to a closet of old clothes and will drive a battered seven year-old car; he/she needs stability zones. Later Toffler would refer to this imagery as "old shoes." Wearing those shoes enables one to walk the changing landscapes of this time. The phenomena coming at us so quickly in the informational age challenge us to discern paths that skirt modern perils.

This chapter will visit some of the places of stress where older stories and modern realities impact our journey

1 Ross Snyder, On Becoming Human (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967), 126.

2 Toffler, 324.

how individuals attempt to create meaningful lives in a moment of great global transition is a challenge. Here caring ministries teams may seek to understand how individuals are responding to the stresses of this time in forming their own meaning centers. In this chapter we will examine stress points of modern life and conflicts of personal values in relation to stories of our biblical traditions. We will also consider the challenge of stewardship in a world of environmental stress; a way of valuing one's life story with poetic/artistic insight and, finally, the possibility of discovering pain and hope in relived historical moments.

Stress Points of Modern Life: Challenge to Old Stories

Everyone would like to think that his or her life is worthwhile. Frankly, that is not how all feel, especially those in the last quarter of their lives. A stroll through the local Sears electronics department with its number and variety of computers, video cassette recorders and the latest developments in sound systems provides the casual shopper with an awareness of technology's surprising changes.

What is perhaps more telling is that the level of technological skills seems inversely proportional to the age of the sales clerk. While some of us are still trying to learn how to program our VCR's, some youthful sales clerks have moved with the rapid changes in computer technology and may spend their days explaining the increasing speed

benefits of the newest computers as well as specific brand differences.

On-going Education and Modern Stress

With the increasingly rapid pace of the informational age where knowledge is so consistently equated with technological and computer awareness and the ability to translate that awareness into productivity, one wonders about the boundaries of one's known world and one's value and place in that world.

Yet, while computers may be evidence of a technological informational age, not everyone needs to own one. What does seem important to understand more fully, however, is that education is a life-long pursuit and one is never too old to learn more about his/her world. Seeing growth as an experience that continues over a life time, meaning and fulfillment may be the result of an active mind seeking to deepen personal understanding and incorporate broader experiences into the next chapter of one's life.

Caring Ministries teams can find educational opportunities provided by the National Commission on Aging, specific programs within the church's ministry to older adults, Elder Hostel Programs, and local hospitals. These provide opportunities to understand better the issues confronting older persons. While most seniors were not raised in an environment where computer knowledge was necessary, they are very familiar with the importance of on-going education for a better quality of life. Caring

ministries teams can become familiar with available opportunities and then encourage and enable seniors to take advantage of these to cope better with technological change and potential opportunities (not only fears) they bring.

Transcendent Moments

Meaning seems to be formed as people are able to integrate change with permanence. The permanence, in this case, is an individual's sense of self as he/she moves through his or her life time. Valuable insights are often recalled as we remember lessons we learned in various circumstances of change or challenge. Insights such as truth or beauty, justice or joy seem to last and transcend our common moments and help us form personal meaning and life satisfaction.

Usually one of the most enriching moments in caring ministries is being able to hear and be involved with the stories of older adults. In their life experiences, momentous insights are often recalled, sometimes holy insights; these seem indelibly etched in memory. Those transient personal moments often interface with historically significant challenges. World War II, for example, brought many people to personal boundaries of heroism or despair. One of the most profoundly transcendent moments occurs as one realizes that one's life is nearly over. It is deeply meaningful in such a time to hear people share the richness of their lived moments.

To be involved in caring ministry is to value the spiritual journey where the boundaries of hope and despair, life and death, are encountered. Transcendent experiences are often discovered at such boundaries. In paradox, in woundedness, in mystery, one encounters wisdom, and often it is not a wisdom easily defined.

Technological, analytical and scientific knowledge are highly valued in this so called modern age, and represent the predominant goals of our production oriented society. Other ways of understanding, however, can contribute to a more transcendent and imaginative interpretation of reality. Art, for example, as it is reflected in story and poetic interpretations, is increasingly valued as complementing and fulfilling analytic thinking. Modern society has valued productivity as a means of valuing persons. Linear thinking, productivity and usefulness have been defined in such a manner that often persons have come to define themselves by their occupation. When one is unemployed, that is considered nonproductive, and the person often experiences diminished worth, sometimes diminished identity. Reflections on what values were most honored over a lifetime, however, may help one to find that his or her job was less crucial to achieving a successful or fulfilled life than was originally believed. In reflection, moments emerge more distinctly--unique moments to which we can return to understand more fully our life story, and what makes that story meaningful.

Finding Ourselves in Bible Stories

The inheritors of the Judeo Christian tradition, perhaps more than many other communities, have at our core a fairly unique family story reflected in the pages of the Bible. Here we encounter the story of a pilgrim people often searching for a place where they belong, where they can dwell in security and peace.

Perhaps the story of Abram and Sara exemplifies this better than some. Coming, as it does, near the very beginning of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, this story is often repeated. In Abram's old age God calls him to leave behind what he has gained (earthly riches, esteem etc.) and move out into a new country into which God will lead him later in the story. Sara has a child when biologically it is impossible; the theme is commonly found in the stories of scripture. God takes what is old and seemingly completed and begins again with surprising results and fulfillment; such a drama is seen as Abram and Sara journey forth in faith (Gen. 12 and Gen. 18:1-15).

Another common theme in the Bible is the emergence of the poor, aged, humble and/or outcast as important leaders. David, the shepherd boy who becomes the King of Israel, is classic (1 Sam. 16:6 - 2 Sam. 2:7). Ruth, a widow without friends, who became the great grandmother of Israel's greatest King, comes to mind (Ruth 1-4). Jesus himself, the Son of God who was born to a carpenter and his wife, is certainly exemplary; and Jesus selected twelve ordinary men

without obvious leadership positions to be his disciples (Matt. 10:1-4; Mark 2:23-3:6; Luke 6:12-16). Throughout his ministry Jesus encountered women and poor people and outcasts, and he empowered them.

Transcendent Memories and Faith Communities

The stories of the Bible, often well known, are touch stones for a common memory and a common history. Touching the transcendent in story, however, is also the Church's great opportunity in this age where individuals are increasingly disconnected from neighbors, from family, indeed, from home.

Being a part of a vital faith community in which people find meaning and value in their shared stories does not mean withdrawing from the excitement and possibilities of our modern era with its technological and scientific comforts and wonderful new openness to social and cultural diversity. Faith communities rather, need to define value and worth in relation to God rather than to external creature comforts. Relationships with God and one another bind people together as they seek meaning and fulfillment.

Personal life stories take place in historical time, in specific cultures, but vital life themes are surprisingly similar for us all; human journeys into disappointment, joy, victory or despair, and eventually hope for life after death, are common to many within the Christian community.

The faith stories that bind us together call us to be as pilgrims, those who feel called to a future destination

as yet unknown. It is a future that calls us to press against secure and familiar boundaries trusting that God is leading us still.

Often at the boundaries of familiar territories we risk discovery of the new. A mature spirituality is not one that avoids pressing against the unknown, but one in which a person has learned to be surprised and enlightened. Jesus spoke to those whom he deemed rigid. He used the example of new wine and old wine skins. You cannot, he said, put new wine into old skins, for if you do, the activity of the ingredients in the new wine will cause the old skins to crack, split and perhaps break. New wine put in old wineskins just will not work. No, he said, we need to change our skins, and by that he meant our attitudes, and be open to where God's spirit may yet be leading us (Luke 5:36-39).

Some might say modernity has become synonymous with technology, consumerism, and male dominated hierarchy; people have had little time for honoring the richness of weaving stories and telling old tales. Yet, for many who take time to listen to the Bible's story, the memory of golden calves worshiped when human beings lost their spiritual priorities is a treasured bit of wisdom. A tendency in our modern time is also to fall down and worship the gods of modernity which we have created and feel we can control. But one wonders how important power and control really are, and where they lead, and what they do to our

humanity? Redirecting our lives often begins when we encounter old truths that have helped shape long lasting values.

Stewardship in a World of Environmental Stress

Discerning wholistic ministry in our modern time seems to call one to examine what stresses are converging on human lives. Our striving toward increased productivity has brought with it increased stress; it has also changed our concept of self in relation to others. The "advances" of our modern era have also disrupted older family systems in that most families no longer reside in one community over many generations.

Economics and Stewardship: Realities and Proposals

Faith communities can help to create alternate visions of stewardship. E. F. Schumacher, author of Small is Beautiful, offered such a vision. He suggested a Buddhist perspective of human economy where people matter more than consumption. In responding to the modern view of Western economics based on increasing consumption (based on Keynesian economics where powerful human drives of selfishness and greed seem the primary motivation), Schumacher offers the Buddhist way.

From a Buddhist point of view (valuing a person because he is employed and can produce more and more for greater consumption) is standing the truth on its head by considering goods as more important than people and consumption as more important than creative activity. It means shifting the emphasis from the worker to the product of the work, that is, from the human to the subhuman, a surrender to the forces of

evil.... It is not wealth that stands in the way of liberation, but the attachment to wealth; not the enjoyment of pleasurable things but the craving for them....

For the modern economist this is very difficult to understand. He's used to measuring the "standard of living" by the amount of annual consumption, assuming all the time that a man who consumes more is "better off" than a man who consumes less.³

Schumacher aided in reviewing how stewardship from a Christian perspective should also value human beings and the quality of life of every human being. A consumer society in which people have learned that more is better needs to ask who decides what better means: Better for whom? for the profit margin of business and corporation, or for human beings?

While still focusing on traditional capitalism, the modern American way of treating employees is shifting toward valuing workers as co-creators of their products. In the auto industry, for example, Lee Iacocca, former Chairman of the Board for Chrysler Corporation, learned that the Japanese model of business management, where workers on the assembly line are treated as partners in the crafted work, does not hamper production quotas. Indeed, the Japanese automobile manufacturing system proved that a human centered approach to work, where people were involved with their

³ E. F. Schumacher, Small Is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 56.

product, produced quality that was highly valued.⁴

Technology and modern economics seemed to have developed with an eye to speed and consumption. the approach to human life has changed dramatically as corporate profitability has become the bottom line for defining success.

Our worldview has also changed as modern technological and economic thinking have demanded that people pick up and move their homes to meet the needs of corporate employers. Theological values in relation to this world of economic and technological change seemed to lag behind.

Christian beliefs developed...in a situation in which the great majority of people lived in the same overall social structure...Today, by contrast, is one in which...discrepant worlds co-exist within the same society, contemporaneously challenging each other's cognitive and normative claims...it becomes difficult in such pluralistic time (and technological age) to have a monopoly of the definition of reality. It seems to me that, quite simply it is time to say 'enough' to the dance around the golden calve of modernity.⁵

The church has tried to accommodate to the demands of the modern world and its view of consumption. Among the values that seem to have been lost or seriously redefined, is the concept of home. The church has not fully faced the degree to which human values and roles have changed, nor the degree to which modern workers have become like gypsies,

4 Lee Iacocca with William Novak, Iacocca (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1984), 321-22.

5 Peter Berger, Facing Up to Modernity: Excursions in Society, Politics, and Religion. (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 170-71.

making their new homes wherever their work takes them.

Stewardship is a theological concept in which many human beings see themselves as co-workers in God's vineyard. The earth will provide for human need, but needs caring, cultivating and keeping for continued harvests. Suffering occurs when humans use and abuse the creation without thought for others or for the future. When people have a strong sense of stewardship, they can revalue human life and human responsibility. Modernity is less tied to agrarian images and more rooted in technology. Dependence upon modernity's technological tools has helped create an environment where strong or rooted relationships with neighbors are less common. If stewardship before God becomes the center for defining our sense of value, perhaps we will also envision all of creation as our common home.

Stewardship and Global Environmental Stress

How we understand truth and meaning is often impacted by the dominant cultural perspective. While this trend can be seen in several arenas, one of the most dramatic is the environmental arena. More than pollution is at stake when a stream no longer provides a healthy environment for fish. What is at stake is an ethical issue, a religious issue. If we human beings cannot care for our earth, it will not provide for us, our future, or the future of life on this planet. As people began to analyze increased cancer rates related directly to pollution, an increased awareness of our interrelatedness on the planet has grown. Areas of

significant pollution in the United States, like Love Canal or the increasingly polluted Great Lakes, have received national attention, and people have begun serious questioning of how we humans are poisoning the very creation that was given to us to steward.

The Presbyterian Eco-Justice Task Force produced a paper (subsequently produced in paperback book form) entitled "Keeping and Healing the Creation." In it was summarized data relative to pollution statistics in several arenas: "Food and Fiber," "Minerals-Nonrenewable Resources," "The Atmosphere," "Water," and "Municipal and Hazardous Waste."

The study focused narrowly, but the implications were clear. Insightful was its statement about toxic wastes:

The toxic danger has been dramatized by the plight of particular communities wherein the effects of wastes improperly stored and perhaps forgotten over many years finally came to light in the form of sudden diseases, numerous miscarriages, and infant abnormalities and deaths. Love Canal in Niagara Falls, New York; Times Beach, Missouri; and (currently) Jacksonville, Arkansas, have emerged not only as symbols of the problem in its acute form, but as portents of a future proliferation of such cases. Moreover, they warn us that the same chemicals that we highly concentrated in those communities are pervasive in small amounts in our environment and our bodies.⁶

This study, done in 1989, summarizes findings more and more available for general review.

⁶ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Eco-Justice Task Force, Keeping and Healing the Creation (Louisville: PCUSA, Committee on Social Witness Policy, 1989), 36-37.

Such reconsideration of what we are doing to the earth and what our practices are doing to us not only focuses on health dangers, but also on recreational activities like fishing, swimming, boating and so forth. Logging interests, for example, once seen in the context of profit and loss on a corporate ledger, are now seen in juxtaposition with environmental degradation and recreation uses, including care for fish habitats, and concern for white water rafting possibilities etc.

Global warming, too, concerns our future and is directly related to forests.

Forests, too, are gifts for sustenance. They provide tree crops, lumber, pulp, and fuel. Hundreds of millions of poor people rely on wood to cook their food and heat their homes. Trees, moreover, play a crucial role in the global cycling of oxygen and carbon, the maintaining of watersheds, and the prevention of erosion. Some 10,000 years ago the forests and woodlands of the earth covered about 6.2 billion hectares. That coverage has shrunk to a third to 4.2 billion.⁷

We are beginning to appreciate the value of rain forests in terms of medical research, too. Each year new discoveries are made about natural healing agents found in rain forests. Examples include a tropical flower called the ruby periwinkle that is valued in the treatment of childhood leukemia, and the medical value of the Pacific Yew tree.

Dwindling natural environment critically effects

7 Ibid., 10.

wildlife as well. The spotted owl controversy in the Pacific Northwest in the early 1990s typifies growing concern for a great variety of animal and plant species threatened with extinction.

The trend toward devaluing the creation, however, seems to be changing. It is changing as we have begun to see ourselves in closer relationship to each other, the planet, and most importantly, to God. Greed still is the problem, and seeing it may well be the first step in repentance.

Schumacher points out the culpability of the United States:

All the same, the industrial system of the United States cannot subsist on internal resources alone and has therefore had to extend its tentacles right around the globe to secure its raw material supplies. For the 5.6 per cent of the world population which live in the United States, require something of the order of forty per cent of the world's primary resources to keep going.⁸

Our theological understanding of whom we are is undergoing global transition, but discerning a healing response may well begin by revisioning our relationship to God and what it means to keep and care for the creation.

The earth has been given to us as a gift, it is our home, but what kind of home it is will depend upon what kind of caretakers we choose to be. God has called us into a relationship and entrusted to us the care of this planet. We are called to be stewards who understand what care means.

8 Schumacher, 119.

Meaning as Artistic Insight

The speed of our modern communications has also brought us into fuller awareness of the world. We are increasingly conscious of the wonderful diversity of the world, its cultures and especially its people.

An artistic television advertisement by National Geographic magazine incorporates three or four second images of people from different parts of the world, as well as geographically specific wildlife and incredible environmental beauty. The message is unmistakeable, we live together in this beautiful home and it is the very diversity of it that makes its wonder.

Some poets and artists are also helping us to understand theological diversity by integrating poetic insight and inventiveness. Matthew Fox is one of a number of theologians helping us encounter such diversity.

We call God Creator. We call ourselves made in that image. The Maidu Indians of California put the equation this way.

Earth Namer took some re-colored dirt. He mixed it with water. Very carefully, he shaped a man and a woman.

First Man and First Woman were very beautiful. But their hands were not finished.

'How shall I make their hands?' asked Earth Namer. 'Make their hands like mine so they can swim' said Coyote. Earth Namer thought and thought.

'No, they must have hands like mine. They must have fingers so that they can make things,' said Earth Namer.

Earth Namer made the hands of First Man and First Woman to look like his own.

Then First Man and First Woman were even more beautiful. They could do many things the animals could not do.'

How accurate is this picture of an inventive act: the artists seeking advice, weighing a variety of possible routes, and finally, deciding on creating after his own image, his own dream. The Earth Namer's creations are his toys, his symbols. We are God's toys, fashioned after his own fantasies and playfulness and formed into that likeness.⁹

The theological underpinning for ministry in the 1990's and well into the next century will increasingly embrace pluralistic insight. It will likely be a time of changes in technology, and of changes in values and meanings too. Stories will not only make possible integration of universal truths, but will also amplify the richness of individual diversity and individual dignity.

One of the more positive realities of the information age is an opportunity to learn more about our world's rich cultural diversity. Perhaps our world is maturing too as we pause to examine and reflect on the rich tapestry of that diversity. Every culture has its own pride of origins, its unique sense of identity. Perhaps by frequently visiting these cultures (through television for most moderns) we will glimpse something of our common values as the human family.

All cultures have their unique identity, each has its own unique understanding of home. Artistry takes differing forms as the richness of our cultural diversity varies. Some artists paint pictures, others may tell stories. Some focus on large, complete images, others pay attention to

⁹ Matthew Fox, Whee! We, Wee, All the Way Home: A Guide to Sensual, Prophetic Spirituality, (Santa Fe: Bear and Co., 1981), 122-23.

detail. Theologians often have a way of trying to understand ideas and feelings and while their art is less visual, the interweaving of this unique world view is certainly artistic as well.

Artistic writers like John Navone analyze how ideas are developed in stories. Navone, among others, has focused attention on why journey themes work so well within narratives.¹⁰ His reflections imply that human experience is the result of ongoing processes in specific places and times; memories of what occurred in those times and places will, of course, be selective. Yet, even in the selective remembering there will be a hint of a future home which welcomes us. Navone asserts that here one

attends to the existential influence of narrative ending or conclusion: The individual lives the present according to the conclusion he anticipates. Consequently, a change in our sense of ending colors our approach to the present. The journey metaphor illustrates the centrality of the ending. When life is lived as a journey, the individual structures his approach to experience according to a basic set of symbols. A pivotal symbol is that of home. In the journey toward a human and fuller existence, the individual is a pilgrim who is journeying toward his true home, which in turn gives sense to his self-renunciation, courage, and remembering.¹¹

We find ourselves in stories that seem to fit our unique sensibilities and hopes. Certain biblical stories

¹⁰ John Navone, Seeking God in Story (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1990), 282.

¹¹ Ibid., 282.

touch that nerve better than others. The Prodigal Son story comes to mind as an example of such a journey motif that resonates with most who know it (Luke 15:11-32). Not only do we know what the story says about one young person who "comes to himself," but we are able to see ourselves within the story and identify with the lostness, the courage to change one's course, and the return home again. Those motifs resonate with our own experience, and we are able actually to enter the story. Though the story is about one lost son, it is about all of us. The message of the Church stands apart from a society that values production and often devalues people. Perhaps the most important part of that message is God's love and acceptance of each of us, our life stories of pain and disappointment, sorrow and joy, sin and altruism. Each person and each person's story is unique.

The storyteller uses words to inform and communicate his/her beliefs. The Native American often communicates through ritual dance; the painter chooses paint and brush applied to canvass; yet, artistry is a means of expression in each case. If we can learn to be open to the variety of expressions that we encounter in differing cultures, perhaps we could be energized instead of frightened by differences. Perhaps, if we can learn to let go of old skins, we can let the Spirit of the new wine enthuse us and help us anticipate positive messages of wholeness.

Capturing the importance of individuality and the movement of the Spirit is an art that the Church attempts to

express in the service of worship. Learning to celebrate the gift of our diversity in our everyday life still lies ahead, but fears are beginning to give way to new possibilities.

I stood beside an artist and his painting--one of those large, very large, paintings that do not represent the world as one logically sees it. I have developed a finesse with age for which I am grateful. I did not blurt out the question as I might have at an earlier time, but the question still formed in my thought: "Why would an artist put such a large, swirling, moving bunch of colors right there above his fireplace mantle?" The question I verbalized was more like, "What is it you wanted to express there?"

His words were less enlightening than the passion that seemed to come to life in the otherwise quiet man. "Colors and movement! Look here, how the lines seem to imply movement, and here, how the colors express alternately warmth and coolness, and here, darkness in sharp contrast to the brighter, more lively colors; darkness broken by hope's light." (The words are mine, only approximations of his, but the surprising passion with which he came alive is, if anything, understated.)

I suspect, when given a chance, we who are involved with a ministry of caring might be better equipped than we think to enable people to paint their pictures, or tell their stories, simply by being aware of the basic human need

to share personal stories and by being sensitive enough to listen receptively.

Standing beside the painter was a moment out of time where his inner symbolic interpretation came alive on the canvas before us and, also, in the telling of what he experienced within. Yet, there was something more, some bond of understanding that also connected the painter and me. Was it art? Or was it passion for life? Maybe the passion, after all, is life.

While some artists paint their understood realities, and theologians deal with a world of meaning in ideas with artistic beauty, others manage to capture concepts that are more emotional with keen insight. Feelings are hard to understand, but some people have a unique gift that can be called little else but artistic.

Ross Snyder is one gifted in his ability to interpret the intricate interrelationship of emotion and feeling.

Feeling as contrasted with emotion, has these components of understanding and evaluation. Feeling is from 'yourself as a whole person.' It includes what is often called the unconscious, but perhaps more appropriately termed the preconscious.... Feeling connects many different experiences over a period of time into a story of us now into its appropriate place. It brings together memories of futures, images of the people we are dealing with, ideas about the world and how it functions. And coheres all these into one womb out of which decision and action is born. Thus feeling both mobilizes and births us.¹²

12 Snyder, 38.

Snyder's concept of the human mind, forever weaving together what is happening, provides an insight into the human capacity to be a story weaver.

Asking people to tell their stories enables reflection on their personal journeys through time, touching unique moments which come alive again with valued meaning. As fellow travelers with them through that same historical landscape, our own stories are informed. Spiritual insight often emerges in the journey as trust and encouragement allow individuals to risk vulnerability.

Each person, in a sense, is an artist, interweaving his/her unique interpretation of meaning and value.

Pain and Hope in Relived Historical Moments

Often it is a common historical moment of "lostness," such as the depression of the 1930s or the Viet Nam War years, that helps us understand a larger social context of valued meaning. Theologically speaking the "death of God" theologies that arose in the 1960s represented a unique moment of intense questioning. Those who lived during those unique historical moments shared some of the same experiences and developed similar responses.

Caring ministry efforts need to incorporate similar historical experiences in understanding a person's fears, hopes, etc. One example is the period of the Viet Nam War. Having personally lived in a time when this war was escalating, I remember close friends who shared with me

feelings about their roles or lack of role vis a vis military service. Listening to the actual pains of those who served, those who refused to serve, and those who were just perplexed, allowed me insights of significant diversity. Having friends come home in body bags did too. When relating to individuals in mid-life going through significant depression, especially men who served in Viet Nam, or lived many of their formative years during the turbulent late sixties and early seventies, Viet Nam looms very large. Sharing the relived pain of those moments with a caring group can provide a reentry into very real lived moments. The group itself, as it hears, not only hears different perspectives, but embraces the actual pain of one who lived during that specific time. When going forth to relate to others who were also influenced by the stresses of that unique historical time in our country, the impact of shared story will enable a different openness to hearing.

Another example of unique historical experiences is the United States' depression of the 1930s. One who lived through the depression might remember the lack of money in those times, but also the sense that all were strangely "equal" in their suffering. Out of that unique time grew a sense of economy that forever shaped those who experienced the uncertainty encountered then. On the other hand, there are many stories of unique family closeness and generosity and compassion that arose out of this forced common poverty. The loss of such common plane is lamented. The historic

moment might cause one to remember both the uncertainty and fear of repeated economic depressions, but also a homogeneous cultural and economic identity that grew out of friendships forged by common need. Out of our common historical experiences of pain, we affirm our human relatedness and our sense of being on a journey together.

Conclusion

Connecting significant, even transcendent moments into a meaningful context is a very important aspect of ministry. This can be done through telling life stories that enable the story tellers and the listeners to walk on common ground, to recognize similar fears and concerns, and yet to choose a path that empowers us to walk energetically into the future.

Caring ministries teams in local churches can help individuals to integrate modern technological concerns by reaffirming lasting truths still cherished by those who know familiar biblical stories. Truth endures, wherever it is discovered. Touching the truth is easier in well known stories.

The truth that has guided the church in the past needs to be applied to our modern landscape. Stewardship is a biblical concept we need to cultivate in order to help preserve and care for a world in ecological and environmental stress.

Perhaps one of the better ways to understand the concept of the sacredness of the earth is to celebrate the

rich cultural diversity of the Creator's hand. God often communicates through the eye of the artist who paints the sunset from his/her unique perspective. A painting from an unfamiliar culture may confuse one who tries to frame it within his or her own idea of what a painting ought to be. Perhaps we need to examine our need for others to conform to what we expect. Education that is spiritually grounded looks for the spirit of life that the artist intends to express, not the limits of the one who sees the artistic work and tries to make it similar to fit his/her limited understanding.

The people of God claim to be those who move with the spirit of God. The spirit moves in strange places. Historically, people have stories rooted in tragic history. Viet Nam's War impacted all, as did other significant historical stress points. One of these was certainly the Global depression of the 1930s. Yet, even in those moments of historical stress, new stories of personal integrity were being shaped. In the midst of our journeys, we encounter detours and even pitfalls, but perhaps the detours themselves can enable us better to grasp the sacredness of our destination. The more we subtract what we don't like, the more we capture what we do.

The journey home is a biblical theme that the church knows; its truth resonates in the prodigal who resides in each of us. Yet we remember that each step of the son's journey was filled with meaning. With that familiar story

as our foundation, the journey toward home helps all of us
pilgrims to walk a little more confidently.

CHAPTER 5

Connecting the Moments: Spiritual Formation and the Educational Journey of the Church Community

To be human is to dwell in a world of meaning making, where life's upward curves as well as its downward curves are integral to meaning making and wholeness. Few metaphors are used as well as the journey metaphor to bring this point home. From John Bunyan's classic Pilgrim's Progress to the present day, the journey to the "place" where God's presence is realized, is a predominant theme. The premise of Swiss psychiatrist and theologian Paul Tournier's book A Place for You emphasizes that the place of God's presence is not external to our lived experience, but is the awareness of alive moments. The sense of God's presence in a commonly shared space and experience provides a connection of contemplative integration and relational wholeness.¹

Tournier relates a true life experience of his own. Suffering from an illness from which he expected to die, his focus for the future was on the promised kingdom of heaven. In short, he was prepared to die. Friends came to visit, friends who prayed with him. Strangely, the disease did not seem to take its normal course. Instead of dying, he got well. In thinking about the specific time, what occurred during the interchange with faithful, caring friends, and

1 Paul Tournier, A Place for You: Psychology and Religion (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 72-73.

about the power of prayer itself, Tournier came to realize that the Place of God was not only "heaven," but was the relational space created between caring, sincere friends. Whenever we create that kind of place between individuals who genuinely care about each other, the Kingdom literally comes about, that is, we participate within it.²

Here, in the midst of one's journey, one forms new interpretations of one's worth. Tournier, in the above example, came to understand that the place he anticipated needed to be redefined. His vision of the kingdom had been limited, contained. His experience of a created relational space expanded his boundaries of understanding.³

Here we see two different understandings of the word Kingdom--one a more defined place, anticipated from biblical images of heaven; the second, a created space that brings attributes of the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed into our lived world.

In a sense, our understanding of time likewise has differing interpretations. One's sense of time, the predominant and most well defined, is chronological time. In the process of aging, one recognizes obvious signs of physical change, and at some point, declining physical health and finally death. A second sense of time takes place within chronological time, but seems to stand apart

2 Ibid., 72-73.

3 Ibid., 72-73.

from it. Reviewing a photo album may be a way of reentering a moment of the past; a sunset may recall other moving moments that seemed to stand still with beauty. There is a holy moment in a marriage ceremony when the bride and groom exchange vows, and married guests remember their own marriage ceremony and how, in that moment, their vows also caused time to stand still. We refer to them as holy moments; maybe because what's important in them is not that they occurred in a specific chronological time, but that we somehow are changed by what occurred in those moments, and something timeless enters our memory to be recalled when we choose. Over time these moments can be connected and celebrated. Within those unique and connected moments, one's unique personality is given depth.

Transformative experiences are like landmarks--unique, identified and valued. The Church here has a unique educational opportunity, perhaps unlike anyone else, to help one form one's spiritual story, connecting those landmarks with a faith perspective, a faith perspective that includes a movement toward "home." The most obvious Biblical example of this relational experience is, again, the Prodigal Son. Those familiar with the story recognize moments in which the Prodigal rebelled, made a decision that he was wrong and wanted to go home, rehearsed what he would say to his father, felt the rejoicing embrace of his father, etc. (Luke 15:11-32).

For those of the Christian family the truth of the experiences of the prodigal resonates with our human experience. In the prodigal's decision, we recognize his belief that in his home he will be cared for and accepted. He longs to return home. There is a longing to return home for most of us--a longing to revisit the place where we were most happy. In a deeper sense, people long to return to the God who loves us completely--a longing to feel the embrace, acceptance and belonging that nourishes our being in its spiritual wholeness. These ideas will be further developed later.

The Travel Story and Life's Boundaries

What brackets a moment in time and causes us to set it apart from other moments varies. We may feel overjoyed, or sad; we may experience wonder or confusion. The world of logic and one's personal need to control are momentarily set aside to let unique feelings and emotions help us discern something more.

Spiritual insight isn't always logical; frequently it may be discerned as our daily journeys and plans are interrupted. A caring ministry is one in which people seek to discern the value of unique moments in relation to the whole story of individuals' lives. It is often at the boundaries of surprise or uncertainty that new directions are taken.

Not only are moments meaningful in reflection, but as members of caring groups become more sensitized to hearing

and accepting, they also need to be aware of tension in themselves as they provide the ministry of caring. A momentous event or personal tragedy can interrupt any agenda --personal or group or class. Interruptions of Caring Ministries teams are going to occur, and sometimes these moments, which seem like detours, become the best possible route to discovering insights regarding caring. These moments may be moments of disappointment, even brokenness; moments of distrust and trust rediscovered; the movement between uncertainty and faith; the risks encountered at the edge of our stories.

Stories embrace greater depth as boundaries of control or routine are crossed. It is often at the boundaries of our comforts that we may choose to expand our understanding of ourselves and our limitations. Perhaps, as in the case of the prodigal, we are able to "come to ourself" as we accept our human condition and learn to be more accepting of others. It is in such openness that we begin to see others differently, and perhaps to understand their holy ground. The place where holy events occur is usually less important than the persons who encounter God's truth in that place. In a real sense, we create the place where we encounter God. This is the concept of place of which theologian Paul Tournier speaks. It is not unlike the space of acceptance and warmth of home. The concept of home encounters us again and again both as our journey's end (heaven) and as a living space in which we relate with fellow travelers.

As I've mentioned before, travel stories, especially those we've encountered in familiar scriptural stories, all have unique events. The phenomena of new experiences, detours or discoveries, and our response to these, help to inform our theological perspective as pilgrim people. Whether we traverse the barren desert in search of the promised land as Israel did, or if we ourselves get lost in a foreign land where familiar languages and customs threaten us, we are responding to the journey's surprises. Learning to examine how all the unique parts of individual stories are imbued with subjective meaning and/or stress helps the fellow journeyer to share the load and be an encourager.

Home is most often associated with love, acceptance, caring and family, but it is not always like that. Broken homes are increasingly evident in our modern world. Hurts, abuse and neglect help to create deep psychic wounds. Certainly there are homes where distress or tragedies have marked life. In most of our homes our experiences were likely mixed as regards happiness, but ordinary in the sense that this is where we resided, slept, ate, and discovered ourselves in relationship to others and the world around us. For most, qualities associated with home are positive for there is a longing to return, if for nothing more than to visit, or a longing for some ideal home that they never had. For most to be "at-home" connotes being ourselves, relaxed, not having to prove ourselves. For most, at-home is associated with dwelling.

John Navone focuses theologically on the themes of journey stories and how these too emphasize a relationship to home, or at least, at-homeness.⁴ In a sense, according to Navone, we understand the personal tensions that exist there because we understand ourselves better in relationship to what we know. On the other hand, change and opportunity for renewal call us to detach and uproot ourselves from known experiences, and such uprooting also brings a sense of loss, sadness and suffering. Each real separation, in a sense, is a foretaste of one's earthly end.⁵ The journey motif within stories then, is one that helps us relate to tensions between the familiar and the foreign; between the hope of a better future, and the dread of loss.

There are particular qualities of life experience which, coming together promote a feeling of at-homeness. They occur within that ever present tension between the polarities of being, found in being itself, and characterize every human being on the levels of his own distinctive capacities for awareness, feelings, reflection and intersubjectivity. . . . The struggle toward transcendence is a question of recognizing the realm (or home) in which the world of everyday experiences, with its movements, uprootings and changes ultimately dwells. There is no authentic at-homeness apart from this realm of Dwelling.⁶

This at-homeness focuses on unique relationships between individuals and what appears to be occurring in

4 Navone, 153.

5 Ibid., 153.

6 Ibid., 153.

events of the moment and/or environment. Emotions such as protection and concern, of coolness and warmth, of freedom and loss all seem to come together in a unique moment.

Creating a sense of at-homeness may well be what the Caring Ministries team is challenged most often to do.

Stories, especially stories involving movement and tension (e.g., obstacles overcome, boundaries pressed, or an experience of polarities of human existence) may be what John Navone intends to describe as "at-homeness" and the journeys from it and toward it. Understanding that many people may be searching not so much for perfection, but for understanding, such as they may associate with at-homeness, might help the caring ministries team to discuss how this can be done.

As a coming-together within the polarities of the human condition, at homeness implies the movement expressed in the limit-language of the travel story, where life is seen as motion (development, growth, inquiry and discovery) in a community of shared concerns and a fundamental trust in a loving God. The travel story's quest for at-homeness implies the antipodes of movement vs. stasis, life vs. death, openness vs. self enclosure, trust vs. fear. The faith community's travel story is its limit-language expressing its limit-experience of that coming together of what-it-is, what-it-was, and what-it-has-to-be.⁷

If at-homeness both creates a sense of acceptance and love, and also brings with it a desire to break away and to discover one's future, there is necessarily a tension, a

7 Navone, 155.

longing for the familiar and a longing to discover. To journey away from home is also to encounter loss, i.e., the loss of loved ones and what was known.

Sharon Daloz Parks contributes a meaningful insight into this discussion in her article, "Home and Pilgrimage."⁸ In it she posits the belief that men and women have a different perspective of journey to and from home. Here again the yearning for autonomy and the desire for communion are analyzed; "Men tend to tell and recognize their story in terms that celebrate moments of separation or differentiation. Women tend to tell and recognize their stories in terms of moments and attachments."⁹ There is a temptation, she says, to see in the metaphor of journey used exclusively, that the immediate moment may be reduced to a mere means to a later goal.

What Parks advocates is a combining of the metaphors of detachment and connection, pilgrims and home-makers, journeying and homesteading. She stresses, "we will not find the wholeness we seek until the imagry of home, homesteading, dwelling, and abiding is restored to a place of centrality in the contemporary imagination."¹⁰ This

8 Sharon Daloz Parks, "Home and Pilgrimage: Companion Metaphors for Personal and Social Transformation," Soundings 72 (Summer and Fall 1989): 297-313.

9 Ibid., 300.

10 Ibid., 303.

combining of home and journey she suggests, may serve as a focus for a call to justice. Instead of the home being seen as a locus of consumerism, and women as mere consumers, the positive images of home as a place of shelter, care and nourishment may change our perspective of value. Parks creates a startling image in asking a simple question: "Is not our growing consciousness of pluralism an invitation to recognize more profoundly that we are each guests to the other in the 'household of God?'" ¹¹

A combining of Park's concept of home as a place of shelter and care and Navone's imagery of people journeying alternately away from and then returning home, may help us develop a keener insight into the value of home. There remains yet another concept that may even more finely tune both Park's and Navone's ideas, that is the additional reflection on the influence of movement between isolated or specific moments in time. The feelings of comfort or acceptance or joy (or negative feelings for that matter) seem associated with specific events or moments that seem to stand apart from other moments. In a sense, home may be understood as both a physical place, but also captured moments in which we were more alive. These moments, well remembered, may be the place where our concepts of home are always alive.

Still, the concept of the journey itself is rich in its

11 Ibid., 312.

metaphorical opportunity. It serves especially well in noting specific moments where a change in life directions may have taken place. Over a lifetime, losses of all sorts become increasingly evident. Yet, these losses may also form momentous landmarks to which one returns.

Time may also play a transformative function as one connects moments which have meaning. Each journey has a destination, but journeys have detours, surprises, and these, like specifically identified moments frozen in time, may help to redefine what path our lives took. Like landmarks on a journey of discovery, there are also moments that transform meaning. As one reenters unique moments, and connects them with emotions learned, one might find those moments the richest of all. Home then, becomes a combination of feelings of acceptance, a sense of journeying to and from home, and also connected momentous encounters that are somehow frozen in membranes of meaning we call memory.

One example of this might be divorce and remarriage. There are few landmark experiences in life as traumatic as divorce. Individuals who have been divorced recognize the experience less as an event than as successive, relived experiences in time. Initially there may be significant pain and anger as reasons for the divorce are examined and/or used as evidence. Later, in reflection, there may be remorse or there may be different emotions such as remembered moments of joy. When children are involved,

there are other, usually ongoing and pragmatic, moments of decision which will have to be made to care for children's needs for security, and personal development and so forth. Ultimately, some sort of healing may come or, if not healing, acceptance of the reality of the divorce.

Remarriage following a divorce may enable one to see a movement from experiences of sadness, loss, rejection and failure to renewed hope and happiness. Here one may see how significant loss moments all have meaning, and yet can be component parts or landmarks of a greater journey experience toward happiness.

If one were to look both at the Prodigal son story and at Paul Tournier's concept of "place," similar feelings of worth, acceptance and God's forgiving embrace are encountered. This is evident near the end of the Lukan story when the Prodigal finally finds his "place" in the arms of his Father. Here he is accepted, loved and rejoiced over by the father who has been looking for his return. The movement of the prodigal toward home and the movement of each of us toward the place where fulfillment and meaning are discovered, have compelling similarity.

The component parts of the prodigal son story can easily be translated into the life experiences of most of us. In part, this is the very reason this story is so well loved; its themes are archetypical: Rejection of those whom we love, seeking our own, selfish way, learning humility, encountering forgiveness and healing, and perhaps finding

one's "place" in the arms of God. Each of us has experienced many of these emotions. Each who knows the story of the prodigal also knows that coming to one's self occurs at some decision point, a decision point that is often identifiable.

The prodigal did not make one choice, but each of his choices impacted his ultimate destination. Looking back and remembering or reentering that story help us to identify transition times, or choices we have made too. Our choices, both those well chosen and those ill chosen, helped shape our destination. Likewise, as we reflect on our personal journeys, most of us will be able to remember and identify not only specific choices, but also moments where we were more keenly alive to some newly realized insight. Here our life story connects with biblical witness in that the great themes of our common human and spiritual journeys are very similar.

One needs to examine one's life journey story as a whole, but also reflect on specific turning points or limits confronted within the story itself. Looking at the parable of the Prodigal and its intentional contradictions also helps us to focus on specific changes of our courses which were affected by our choices. Through events told within the story we are able to associate with the changes made by the main characters.

John Dominic Crossan has done significant work in the arena of understanding Jesus' use of parable and its

function in helping us to understand change. He emphasizes that myth establishes the way we generally interpret the world in which we live, but the function of parable is to challenge us to consider new perspectives, or challenge older views. By teaching in parable, Jesus communicates metaphorically, setting the familiar in a new context, making words mean more than they ordinarily would. The truth of God's will is manifest indirectly through the story told.

Confronting older ways that dominate our established way of looking at the world is exactly what parables do. In so doing the parable also lets us make connections with our own life stories and our need to change perspectives. John Crossan in talking about stories says,

Myth establishes the world. Apologue defends world. Actions investigates world. Satire attacks world. Parable subverts world. It is clear, I hope, that parable can only subvert the world created in and by myth.... It is a story deliberately calculated to show the limitations of myth, to shatter the world so that its relativity becomes apparent.¹²

Sometimes people think they know where their life is going and a surprise or tragedy impacts their plans. It is in learning that it is often in the surprises or contradictions of how the world tells us things ought to be, that we discover some of the most meaningful of our life's experiences. A divorce, for example, threatens to destroy the world we've been taught accept as normal. People are

12 Crossan, 59-60.

forced to deal with what appears a tremendous roadblock. Yet, that which appears to be a roadblock, may turn out to be an opportunity for newness of life. What appears initially to be an ending, turns out, in many cases, to be a new beginning. In a sense, our life's richest journeys may occur when we encounter the most uncomfortable or extreme experiences.

Connections and Contemplation

Meaning making focuses not only on reclaiming the lived moment, but also in connecting insights related to several similar lived moments. Often these experiences are seen both in specific contexts and in a more ontological sense.¹³

In these moments, we may discover that we have a similar pattern of valuing, or that we have again and again moved toward transformation. We may discover the importance of "home" and its compelling draw. Connecting moments in time helps us to examine boundaries of our awareness and helps us to claim a growing satisfaction with who we are. When I was a child of six or seven, I remember a discovery about diversity that stays alive in memory. I remember finding a shard of thick glass one summer's morning. To children of six or seven years, everything is a toy. That

13 Ross Snyder in his Meanings Formation Workshop has done significant work in this field and I will refer to it later in this work.

shard of glass was my toy that morning, but it would remain symbolic in a way that transcended its "toyness." Intent in focusing the sun's light on a dried leaf (as I had already witnessed this kind of use of such a magnifying glass) I held the thick glass in similar fashion, or so I thought. I had not expected to see what I next discovered; multiple colors of light. As the sunlight passed through my prism I saw that light was composed of many different hues invisible to the naked eye. The colors were there, I just had not seen them. How much more is there to learn, I remember wondering, about things I don't understand. In good six or seven year old fashion what I did next flowed naturally. I forgot all about the colors and looked for a dried leaf to burn!

It took me years to learn that valuing the wonder of diverse colors is a contemplative mystery that leads to celebration, while destruction leads more to an active desire to manipulate one's surroundings, control them. Yet, both the desire to control and manipulate the environment and to reflect on its wonder are parts of a whole experience. It is in this very sphere of contemplation that reflective thinking and prayer, as well as thanksgiving and praise, find their rootedness.

Few contemplatives can express themselves as well as Thomas Merton. In talking about contemplation and prayer he says:

The reality of God is known to us in contemplation in an entirely new way. When we apprehend God through the medium of concepts we see Him as an object separate from ourselves, as a being from whom we are alienated, even though we believe that He loves us and that we love Him. In contemplation this division disappears, for contemplation goes beyond concepts and apprehends God not as a separate object but as a Reality within our own reality.... Contemplation is the highest and most paradoxical form of self-realization, attained by apparent self-annihilation.... Life, then is not only known, but lived. It is lived and experienced in its completeness, that is to say in all the ramifications of its spiritual activity.¹⁴

Contemplation may be thought of as reflection on an insight or a lesson learned from phenomena encountered; it is also a deeply felt awareness in which we both lose ourselves and discover ourselves. Contemplation reflects not only on events or specific objects in memory, but also on what was learned about those objects, events or encounters. Contemplative moments enable life to come alive for us in a new way, with deeper meaning and help us connect with purpose and wonder.

Contemplation includes analysis, but also allows for pondering. How might an observed experience connect with other events which may be similar? Contemplation also allows for questions of wonderment. Is there some insight about the observation that reminds us of some other event?

14 Thomas Merton, The New Man (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1961), 10-11.

Could a lesson be learned or an insight gained, especially one that points to potential outcomes in a new encounter?

The Church has a unique opportunity to seek spiritually oriented truths that may remain hidden to the scientist who is not inclined to weigh subjective possibilities. Spiritual questing is the role of the Church, and in the United States it is often discouraged in other arenas, such as the secular school system. Moral development apart from consideration of spiritual concerns may be a possibility, but if history is any kind of teacher, it isn't likely.

Reflections and Celebrations

Aging often moves one more toward the reflective and celebrative if one has learned to value life's diverse mysteries. (This concept of valuing is developed well by Ross Snyder and will be the focus of the next section.)

A modern technological example of how this could be experienced might be through the use of a VCR movie camera. Using a modern video camera one can visually revisit scenes that captivated interest in the moment they occurred. One can see again and again, in vivid colors, not only beautiful spots where one vacationed, but also children now grown into adults, or adults no longer alive, who were precious. As one reviews moments on modern VCRs, one notes change and movement, one also encounters a sense of loss and passage of time, as well as yet another dimension, either regret that one developed a habit of being a spectator in life's moments, or a sense of celebration in having lived moments

fully. Likely, most of our lives reflect both regret and celebration.

A primary goal for those involved in caring ministries would be to move toward embracing the contemplative and evaluative. As one reflects over his or her life journey, one is able often to identify the turning points that led to various destinations. Such reflection not only helps people to discern specific turning points, but also to evaluate whether these were pleasing or enjoyable, and whether or not they led in positive directions. Certain times cause pain to be relieved; others move one more obviously toward joy, but often both emotions are interwoven, and both help to shape who we are.

Each person's story is unique. To have reached old age, particularly, is an achievement to be honored. As we honor people's unique stories, we move toward enhancing their life, and likely their sense of value. The privilege of hearing and/or entering their story, is to become a fellow journeyer. One becomes a part of the story to be recalled, relived, and hopefully celebrated.

To move toward life's celebrative moments, and the diverse colors that we enjoyed, doesn't mean avoidance of regrettable experiences one might have had. In regrettable, even tragic moments, one learns to refocus on growth that occurred, and perhaps also connect these in a meaningful fashion. The possibility is to see the multicolored diversity of our lives and to understand that all of the

colors are contributors to depth and contrast, even passion. As a shard of glass allows one to see differing hues of light invisible to the naked eye, so contemplation, reflection and spiritually connected insights add an aliveness to our lives, moving us to deeper emotional and often celebrative responses.

The Covenant Community's Collective Remembering

The crucible for such understanding is education, an education that values gifts and graces; science and artistry; knowledge and wisdom. The Church is a spiritual community journeying with God. From the time of Abraham's journey, but especially evident in the exodus event, Israel was identified as a community of faith, unique, different from her neighbors. Her sense of community, based on faithfulness to the Covenant by which the people were bound to God and to each other, set her apart from neighbors whose identity was more specifically geographic. Israel and the individual within the community of Israel were personally intertwined. In the journey of one, the fate of the nation was held. Here one might remember again Ruth and her decision to follow Naomi and the resultant generations from which ultimately King David was born.

The community of the early church obviously bore a faithfulness to each other and a commitment to Jesus Christ that was held suspect by the cultures in which the Church

developed.¹⁵ Commitment to Christ called one to a life style of shared property and a unique bond of love bound in anticipation of the arrival of the Kingdom. Those who were faithful on earth would become the New Jerusalem. Attacks on the Christian community identified individuals as having common interests but also common life practices modeled after Jesus of Nazareth. In the earliest thinking of the Church, the Kingdom of God was eternal, yet promised to arrive on the apocalyptic day soon to arrive. Christians both journeyed toward heaven and also anticipated a new earth to occur in which they would expect to have a role.

Modernity's Challenge

To a large degree the Church has always been affected by the culture in which it is a part. Theologian Peter Berger, in commenting on modernity, touches what he calls its dehumanization:

There is no reason to doubt what battalions of psychologists have been telling us for decades, namely that the pace of modern life is detrimental of mental well-being and may also be harmful to physical health. Futurity means endless striving, restlessness and a mounting incapacity for repose. It is precisely this aspect of modernization that is perceived as dehumanizing in many non-Western

15 See Acts 2:43-47 and 4:32-5:11. The early Christian community lived in expectation of Christ's expected imminent return. In Acts 2 and chapters immediately following, one sees how the early church attempted to share all things. The description of the church in the book of Acts indicates a communal commitment to sharing all things in common, at least in theory.

cultures.¹⁶

Berger goes on to comment on the U.S. culture of the sixties and seventies, and how the best known theological movements seemed to vie with each other in the

eagerness with which they sought to divest the Churches of their traditional contents and replace these with a variety of secular gospels, existentialism, psychoanalysis, revolutionary liberation, or avante garde sensitivity. The death of God theology was a grotesque climax of this theological self-disembowelment.¹⁷

Growing up in a technological and pluralistic time has further broadened our understanding of wholeness. Not only was it assumed that progress equated with increased consumerism, but whole systems of how things ought to be began to be tested. In racial inequities there was a demand for increased civil rights; in the business world there was a demand for customer satisfaction; in the sexual freedom movement was an emerging new social freedom which threatened older values; in the sexual revolution the role of the traditional family would be questioned; in understanding human equality the male dominant system that kept women as second class citizens was to change with rapid and dynamic impact. Embracing the rights of each human being demands an openness to each individual's story. Pluralism demands greater openness to cultural diversity and to unique gifts

16 Berger, 74.

17 Ibid., 157.

that have been earlier regarded with suspicion. Technology has enabled us to reach into the far reaches of outer space, but also to bring the entire world, with all its richness and pain, into our living room.

The rapid pace of change may create a sense of fragmentation or splintering of meaning in older adults. Older adults, especially, do not deal comfortably with change. When that change confronts them on television or in the newspaper or periodicals, it may further enhance their view that the world is coming apart, i.e., all the values I embraced earlier seem to be irrelevant in today's modern world.

Caring ministries teams may well be equipped to help interpret such changes, or they may help individuals to see how their meaningful world views are still valid for them. Helping especially the frail elderly to cope may be a noble effort.

Importantly, older adults need to be treated with the respect they deserve. I remember visiting a 90 year old, blind woman who was a member of our church. I came expecting to read to her, as I knew she was fond of people doing that. I also knew her to be a deeply spiritual person. I came expecting to read the scriptures. While she was polite and grateful, it was about my third such visit when she indicated that it would be nice if I would read to her the latest copies of U.S. News and World Report!

Even in stressful historic moments there are opportunities for exciting personal challenge and growth among older adults. Contained in the religious and cultural changes of the 1960s in this country were the seeds of dramatic theological shifting too. Out of the "Death of God" theologies grew Jurgen Moltmann's Theology of Hope, a dramatic reclaiming of the promises of God as a power that calls the faithful into the future that is not yet, a future wherein the God who met us in Christ and his resurrection continues to call the faithful to live in trusting hope.¹⁸

The Reign of God in Our Contemporary World

Though the theology of the nineties will likely not be as systematic as an earlier time, the place where God's people gather is still the church, a church more alive in some ways, than ever before. The goal of the community of faith is to provide a faith vision that enables people to understand the reign of God in the midst of their lived stories with a fresh personal seriousness. The goal is a congregation seriously seeking to express the reign of God within their contemporary life. A secondary goal is the maturing of one's faith as he or she participates with others in seeking to grow in deeper understandings of God and the world.

C. Ellis Nelson has edited a collection of articles emphasizing the transforming power that can be found in

18 Jurgen Moltman, Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1967).

local congregations. In his book, Congregations: Their Power to Form and Transform, ten noted educators and leaders contribute their insights.¹⁹ The emphasis, in Nelson's words, is to understand that the congregation is more than the sum of its groups. It includes all ages and conditions of its members, yet it is different in that it actively seeks God's transforming spirit within the community. Spiritual formation, through education, moves beyond the bible, though the bible remains its primary source, to seek the transforming presence and power of God present now in the community of faith where people claim their gifts.

A child hears the story of the Bible but hears more than a story. He or she learns from a teacher who herself is committed to the revelation of a God who cares for all God's children. The earliest experiences of a child in Church school are usually stories rooted in the theme of God's saving grace directed toward God's (often wayward) children. Again, here are found the familiar concepts of family, of home, and of journey toward home. One does not hear the story in a vacuum, one hears it told by a teacher who also usually prays, sings and hugs his or her students. There is a sense of early communion with God's embrace of the Prodigal told again and again; an encounter with a God capable of creating the entire universe but also capable of

19 C. Ellis Nelson, "Why This Book on Congregations?" Congregations: Their Power to Form and Transform, ed. C. Ellis Nelson (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 4.

destroying the entire creation; a story of a boy dreamer named Joseph who possessed a coat of long sleeves, and another child named Jesus who loved the world so much that he denies his family to die for the entire human family. The bible, in the context of the church school education, describes one family with unique connectedness with God. The stories help shape our ideas of goodness and evil, and also guide our paths. The stories shape the goal of our own story journey. From the time a child has his/her first experience with Bible school or Church school there is a sense that he or she is a part of a special family. The lessons are coupled with the prayers and serious caring of adult leaders. Later follows the liturgical celebration of worship and singing all of which centers around the biblical and ecclesial stories of our faith community.

Education that leads to spiritual formation usually begins at an early age when children are taught to integrate prayer, obedience, confession of sin, acceptance by a loving God who forgives us, nobility and so forth. Spiritual formation, unlike secular education, posits faith as a primary goal for discovering wholeness.

One of the most important components of spiritual journeying is that it points to goals people may embrace. Eugene Bianchi speaks of the role of contemplation in directing people toward a higher calling: "Without contemplation . . . a people falls into the destructive stances of 'kill and survive'; with a contemplative

experience, people are more willing to 'die and become.'²⁰ These contrasts are taken from a recent work of E. Erickson whose thoughts Bianchi shares: "But there is the other, the transcendent, effort at insuring salvation through a conscious acceptance of finiteness. . . instead of a competition for the world's goods it seeks human brotherhood and self-denial."²¹

Here Eugene Bianchi posits an important image of life as a spiritual journey. Mid-life, as he calls it, becomes a critical time for such spiritual turning points. While life in the last quarter modifies mid-life decision-making, that process itself is a refinement of what occurred in mid-life. "One of the tasks of mid-life, therefore, with the highest potential for individual and social well-being, concerns the reversal of the kill and survive attitude into that of die and become."²² This turn about is another way of addressing a central element in mid-life spirituality. The components of this reversal, or conversion, are interrelated: contemplation, finitude, nonviolence. If we listen to its rhythms, mid-life opens us to the contemplative moment. The message of mid-life is, in part, to slow down, listen to deeper impulses, question the hectic pace of youthfulness.

20 Bianchi, 43-44.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

Indeed, contemplation brings us face to face with the reality of personal finitude. In contemplation, according to Bianchi, one is able to let go of needs for a more survivalist mentality to embrace a more generous attitude, one that reflects a willingness to sacrifice for someone else's benefit. "We gradually accept personal mortality. 'Die and become' calls into question our youthful desires for the wealth and dominating power that would garrison us about with protection against extinction."²³

As one ages, one seems to be given increasing options about where one places value. Some will choose always to be spectators, others will need to integrate and be involved. I have an acquaintance who loves to travel. No, she loves to tell others of her travels. In a recent visit with us she showed pictures of several places she'd stopped to see in a short period of time. When I asked questions about some of the pictures, however, little was remembered about the inspiration that led her to take the picture in the first place. I conjured up the image of one visiting the Grand Canyon, jumping out of the car long enough to snap two or three pictures and then hopping back into the car and moving on to the next site indicated in the travel brochure.

Secular life especially seems to isolate moments in a disconnected sort of way. People may be encouraged to travel to encounter unique and unfamiliar parts of the world

23 Ibid, 45.

but in the same sense of "doing lunch." That is, "doing lunch" is often expressed as a momentary and obligatory encounter to which one commits oneself even though one has a busy schedule. "Doing lunch" is for busy people who may or may not be able to schedule their lives in such a way as to enjoy themselves because there is never enough time to do so. For many, "doing lunch" or "doing" certain things on vacation may result in disconnected moments, once (quickly) encountered but easily forgotten.

Connecting moments on a journey, on the other hand, seems to require a personal, contemplative evaluation which often requires commitment, if not surrender, of self to the other. The "other" may be a personal place that demands we pause from busy schedules to embrace the wonder of a natural landscape, or take a long personal look at a loved one we may not see again. A personal investment that values what occurred in stories ancient, or those just told, is an investment that brings new freshness and even passion for our own journeys, as well as our journey together. On the other hand, some people can be so caught up in the meaning of connected moments that a story, when well told, may bring more fullness than an actual visit to a site that is photographed but never really encountered.

Conclusion

There are too few opportunities in our lives to review and rediscover events that added depth and value to our lives. A photograph album, or its modern counterpart, a

video tape, provide some of the best opportunities for such review. While such an album could be carelessly filled with photos or video scenes, of landscapes no longer recognizable, it could also reflect significant places and significant people in our life experience.

More often than not, most family albums take care to focus on people. Reviewing such an album, one sees youthfulness grow to maturity. Photos of places stir a sense of value as we remember our feelings related to encountering those places. A photo of the Grand Canyon, for example, may bring back to memory our sense of awesome wonder. The wonder is what most of us try to revisit. It is the joy of childhood and childhood experiences that we attempt to celebrate as we see childhood images. It is love that we try to recapture in viewing family members and friends no longer seen.

Wholeness seems to be the result of a life long process of recording significant moments, each alive with its own uniqueness. As one reviews his/her life, there may be moments of pain that bring tears; there will also be moments of ecstasy. The connection of our emotions and memories through reflection is more than a trail of unrelated events; it is our meaning center. We can value life and its experiences and tie those experiences together in a process of growth, or we can pile random patterns or images together that have little connection.

Random photos of places visited may now seem to bring us little memory, only confusion about what year they were taken, or where they were or what they were, they reflect some uncomfortable randomness about our lives. Indeed some people's lives may resemble a cardboard shoebox of photos quickly snapped, but encounters never quite fully experienced. I have noticed people are more reluctant to revisit the miscellaneous photos in shoe boxes than the well ordered photograph albums.

Perhaps Caring Ministries' teams can help people put their random photos into a meaningful order. Perhaps some of those photos still rekindle expressions of wonder or joy. In putting the random into order, chaos becomes more connected by a life pattern. One person's life span can remain as a random collection or it can be a history filled with meaning and wholeness. A caring friend can help create the home space for those memories as that friend helps us to connect those random moments into an integrated whole.

CHAPTER 6

Retreats for Meaning Formation and Guided Autobiography

There are many opportunities for caring groups to be involved in meaning making, but how these integrate in a positive sort of way within the local church may not be clear. Obviously gathering to discuss our concerns on a regular basis is foundational. Realizing good educational opportunities is important to continued growth, and periodicals such as the Journal of Religion and Gerontology and books designed for aiding in ministry with the aged are essential. Retreats with caring groups is another creative possibility. There are few means as successful, however, as on-going groups for learning.

Below are described two possible formats for ongoing learning groups. Such material may also be used successfully on weekend retreats. Ross and Martha Synder's Meaning Formation Workshops focus on interiorizing and learning to express, through writing one's personal story--lived Moment, psychohistory, personal manifesto and saga. The second possibility is Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults by Birren and Deutchman.¹ This guided study also focuses on story telling and writing, but doesn't

¹ James E. Birren and Donna E. Deutchman, Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

focus as much on insights of particular moments. As the title implies, the focus is strictly autobiographical.

Meaning Formation Workshops

Let us begin with an introduction to Ross and Martha Snyder's Meaning Formation Workshops. The Snyders have focused much of their interest in the area of personhood, what it means to become "human," the "beloved community," and "life world." Much of Ross Snyder's thinking is based on phenomenological and existential reflection as it is integrated in the meanings unit. Those familiar with the writings of Soren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl, would immediately see the influence of these thinkers in the work of Ross Snyder.

Groups of six people seem to be more fitting for the extended class that Ross and Martha designed. In one case examined by Richard Wallace for a research project report, Ross Snyder invited seniors from a local congregation to become a part of his class.² When the class formed, each person was invited to write down a "lived moment," that is, a personal experience that was alive uniquely in memory which might have been "revisited" frequently. When that moment was written down, those participating were invited to

² Richard Wallace, "Meanings Formation Workshop with Ross and Martha Snyder," Research Project Report, School of Theology at Claremont, Summer 1987.

share that moment with the groups assembled. People became aware of each other in deeper ways and came to understand how little they actually knew each other beforehand. Deeper appreciation for the "journeys" of the other were immediately experienced.

While leadership is critical, most of the work is actually done by the participants who interact with each other. Leadership, of course, focuses on guiding the format, drawing out spiritual insight, caring and listening. But the heart of the gatherings is in the group's sensitive hearing of one another, identifying with similar life experiences, and recognizing similar interpretations of meaning.

The session itself consisted of six two-hour meetings held every other week. As the group first assembles, it is important that definition is given for terms. Here too, the hopes and intentions for the sessions should also be discussed.

The purpose for the first session, according to the Snyders, is to encourage individuals to become something definite before God. Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard developed a concept that may be a basis for understanding this concept. His idea was that definition was discovered as we make a personal decision and then act on the impulses that result from that decision.³ A decision that nuclear

3 Ibid., 84.

weapons are terribly wrong, for example, might lead one to participate in an anti-nuclear weapons march on a nuclear weapons test facility. Such decision, coupled with a resultant action, helps give definition to whom we are.

The second main purpose of the Meaning's Formation session is to define the concept of "beloved community." More than being members of the same church, people seek to integrate a more personal bonding with caring people. The example of the Gospel of John is called to mind, "Abide in me and I in you" (15:4a).

An interesting way to imagine the experience of a beloved community is an exercise wherein those assembled form a circle and shut their eyes. They are instructed then to put their arms around their nearest neighbor. They are instructed to listen to the reading of the first part of the chapter of John 15 (1-15) about being a part of the vine, and how, apart from the vine, branches do not produce fruit. The person reading might invite members, with eyes still closed, to take a step forward in a planned pause in the reading of the biblical text. Soon the group has drawn closer together in what might be described as a unique community united in Christ as the true vine.

After the group has drawn steps closer to the center of their circle, they are also invited to listen to a second reading of the complete text as they are invited to take steps backward. Eventually they are invited to drop their arms and stand apart from each other. The words "for apart

from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5b) reaffirm the loss of this connectedness. This exercise may help people to understand better the concept of being the beloved community.

In describing the "lived moment," the Snyders gave this definition of meaning:

Meanings give us structure to the world we live in. Meanings make possible covenant with other people. With meanings a person can hold onto possibilities yet to be realized. They tell us who we are, our identity and the life-world we want. They help us true up ourselves and to persist in the disparate times. Meanings help us think destiny. Meanings enable us 'to hold the highway and let the spirit lead.' Meanings give a person permanent membership in creation.⁴

Ross Snyder's phrase "Wild Energies of God" is one that captures the imagination as participants attempt to form religious meaning. "Membranes of meaning" is another important concept in Meaning Formation, as these are fibers of meaning that connect lived moments together into a whole. Snyder says, "You have to have membranes to be able to catch energy and hold it, storing precisely the needed amount and releasing it in measured shares."⁵ These membranes allow for interactions and relationships (connections) with other meanings.

4 Wallace, 5., quoted from the unpublished papers of Ross Snyder.

5 Ibid., 6. Here Snyder refers to Lewis Thomas' book, The Lives of a Cell (New York: Viking Press, 1974), 145.

As groups gather on a retreat, it is often important for them to feel comfortable about defining who they are and what significant events or moments they will lift up.

Frequently a nonthreatening suggestion might be to describe something like what kind of heating system was in the house in which they lived as a teenager, or what room was the most important family room. Soon people will make associations which will enable personal feelings to be spoken to life. Setting a context, such as centering on a familiar room in one's family home, may be likened to setting a stage for a drama to be viewed. This setting thus understood will enable one to better understand the membranes of meaning of which Ross Snyder speaks. In such remembered, or contained, moments one is able to recapture what Snyder refers to as energy.

In actually writing down the Lived Moment, intensity is encountered in the Snyders' workshop. This writing technique is valuable because it affirms that the writer him/herself is "at stake" in interpreting the significance of the moment. The first step in a Meaning Formation Workshop is to record one such Lived Moment.

In recording lived moments, one learns that the lived moment may have distinct parts: (1) What kind of experience was it? Name it. (2) What does that moment tell about you? (3) What does it tell others and yourself about God and the nature of reality? (4) Can you put your experience in a celebrative form, e.g., could you write a poem, or a song

about your understanding of God or faith? 6

Lived Moment

The second session Of the Meanings Formation Workshop begins with members of the group reading their lived. The leader is, of course, the one who goes first to share his/her lived moment so that others are comfortable in understanding the amount of self disclosure that might be expected. Listening carefully to the lived moments (stories) told, one is enabled to interiorize the emotions and values within the lived moment that is being shared. The greater part of this interval is spent by the sharing and hearing of others' lived moments.

The thoughts and practices of Ross Snyder come to life through the words of Richard Wallace's description and interpretation. Wallace notes the depth of character (layers is a term he uses) with each individual. He quotes Snyder's thoughts:

The person talking to you is a unique cluster of memories of the past and expectations for the future. Within her is constantly going on a world premier of experiencing. She is the only person in the whole world in direct touch with how she feels, sees, exists. She is a need to reveal herself...to be known as she knows herself. She is at pain to be authentic....to experience a moment of truth and to blossom....A person is an overpowering will-to-be. To attain completion, to arrive at destination. Within this person is a

6 Wallace, 11-13.

great toughness for her own integrity.
Tenacity in the face of adversity. 7

It is interesting to see how Ross Snyder incorporates ideas formed throughout his life. For example, these similar thoughts are found in his book On Becoming Human: "A truly religious faith enables being with and for people, not just because our religious heritage teaches us that we 'should' love other people, though it does, but because we feel the love and creativeness of God coming toward us in power. And welling up within us toward our fellow (man) convincing us that God is just as concerned about their lives as about our's."8 This dynamic of each person "struggling to be a Self" is also precious in the eyes of God, a sacred story being lived out in many expressions, authentic and holy. The goal of Meaning Formation Workshops is to discover what it means to be fully or "magnificently" human.

Psycho History

The next step is for participants to write their Psychohistory. In writing Psychohistory one becomes aware of the "growing interiority amongst the events of the world at the time."9 Herein, lived moments are

7 Ibid. 15-16. Here Wallace relates to the meditation "Who is the person talking with you?" written by Ross Snyder. The intent of reading it was to help people understand Lived Moments better, and later to write their own.

8 Snyder, 55.

9 Wallace, 9.

integrated into one's personal story, but also one senses a directionality, a choice, that pointed a new way. St. Paul's writing serves as a rich, poetic example of one whose history was shaped by his life's experiences. One senses the results of choices Paul made. As one reads (and/or) hears the familiar passages read as personal experiences, not completely unlike our personal experiences, the life of Paul's epistles can come alive.

For by one Spirit
We were all baptized into one body
and all are made to drink of one Spirit
For the body does not consist of one member
but many there are many parts
yet one body.
The eye cannot say to the hand
I have no need of you
Nor again the head to the feet
I have no need of you
But God has so adjusted the body
That the members may have the same care
for one another
If one member suffers
all suffer together
If one member is honored
all rejoice together
Now you are the body of Christ
and individually members of it.

1 Cor. 12:13-14, 20, 21, 24-27 (RSV)

Throughout the Meanings Formation sessions, one is encouraged to write creatively, even poetically. Singing is also an important component of the group's gathering. The practice of reaching down deep to find lived moments, attempting to describe them and seeking to integrate them poetically, leads to celebration. One comes to an awareness of being unique, having a unique meaning before God and each other. Retreat possibilities provide a good time for

individuals to find solitude and reflective moments. Some of these moments can be designated for people to write down their thoughts, knowing beforehand that they will be invited to share their insights with the larger group (but only those insights they feel comfortable in sharing). Writing, whether in a journal for daily reflection, or in a retreat setting where information will later be shared, allows one to develop ideas more fully, and gain a more integrated insight of the experience. Recognizing one's uniqueness in relationship to God, and yet as a creature of God, leads to the next step in the guided process.

Manifesto

A manifesto is an expression of a claimed, even declared identity. As one retraces his or her stories, one begins to discern certain patterns repeating themselves. Those listening can often discern these as they are shared (an opportunity may be available to members of the group to point out similarities in stories to the storyteller who may not have recognized the connections). As one moves through sharing lived moments, attempting to write them down, read them, and move toward celebrating them, one also senses uniqueness, or definition. This definition seems to identify significant values that one claims, values that change the course of one's journey and, ultimately, lead to greater wholeness. To write these values is to write one's manifesto.

An important ingredient in these sessions is reading significant (historical often, but not always) manifestos in the lives of others. The Snyders often included the example of Horace Mann, his encounters, his beliefs, indeed, his story. In reading selections from Horace Mann, one senses his manifesto'.

My name is Horace Mann.

I love America -- this country where our forefathers had the courage to try a new form of government -- different from the Old World.

America is something big in the long experiment of man; and i'd like to tell you of a big idea about America. It's an idea that some of us started a hundred years ago, and what you do now and decide will make it succeed or fail. Let me tell you about it, and why it's so important: and then, will you let me know where you stand? I'd like to have you help in developing this idea . . .

The Common Public School is the greatest discovery ever made by man. It is supereminet over all others -- first in its universality; (for it is spacious enough to receive and cherish every child that comes into the world); and second, in the timelessness of the aid it proffers.

You won't understand me unless you understand how I came by this idea. 10

In the above selected readings, one comes to understand the manifesto, the expressed and declared identity of Horace Mann. One seeks to grasp whole patterns of thought interwoven into a larger fabric of belief. The pains of growth often are described, but more importance is given to

10 Wallace, 41, quoting Ross and Martha Snyder. "Meanings Formation," VI, unpublished paper, n.d.

the resolution.

In sharing significant stories, one may or may not hear of the difficult times, the struggles. Yet all of us know that it is often in the difficult times that growth is most notable (not always while they are occurring, I might add). This encounter and integration of struggle is the essence of saga.

Saga

To write one's saga is to write one's life journey. "Saga is not concerned with incidental happenings, it is a story of the Holy who is present and moving into the future. More than a series of reminiscences, saga is an engagement with history, and God is in the midst of it." 11 According to Ross Snyder,

Saga involves both origination and catastrophe.
Sometimes I am fighting up from defeat.
But I am a soul
And what I am fighting for has grandeur.
In a particular place and time
Creation will continue.
Saga is more than a review of the past.
I still mean this Saga and intend to journey it.
It is a spiral up the mountain with valleys and
mixed up ravines, and look out points toward
vistas. And startles. The saga gives meaning and
song, direction and integrity to the whole. 12

Retreats are great opportunities for people to hear from others who have encountered and overcome obstacles in

11 Wallace, 47, quoting Ross and Martha Snyder, "Meanings Formation," VI, unpublished paper, n.d.

12 Ibid., 47.

their life journeys. The theme of the journey is frequently a concept that enables individuals to see how their lives move forward toward the present moment. Israel moving through the desert, for example, is sometimes a theme suggested for fellowship or study groups trying to understand their own personal journeys. In Israel's journey, as well as our own, there were obstacles that threatened people so much that there were times they would have preferred the safe slavery of Egypt to the unknown dangers of what lie ahead.

People's lives often find obstacles that threaten. How these obstacles were overcome or resulted in a sense of missed opportunities helps one to examine the inter-relationships of fear and faith, courage or intimidation, risk or security, and so forth.

There is something holy within us; at least this is what the community of faith proclaims. What follows from this image of being a special creation is a sense of life as a sacred journey, and one's specific life as a pilgrimage. As pilgrims, we aim for the Place where God calls us. Reflecting on our life journeys toward that place creates an opportunity to develop a unique personal journey story but a journey whose features are common to the great themes of history's greatest journeys.

Here again participants are encouraged to write out their feelings, this time in terms of a saga -- or great journey story. In order to write this section, "My Saga,"

participants are instructed to choose several lived moments that show their journey "with the Holy."

Celebration

Celebration is considered a natural act to climax significant experiences, to complete them, fix them, honor them.

An experience is incomplete without lifting up with joy the significance, the insights into what life is about, the deep feelings of reverence and commitments, the Holy that pervades and sustains this amazing universe, the real struggle and battle for survival in which we are caught, the dreams toward the future. 13

Richard Wallace described in his experience of Meaning Formation the celebration that found people encouraged to express creatively their individual celebrative discoveries from their time together.

A concluding worship celebration for retreats is common and an excellent opportunity for people to tie together the events of that special time away. One visual way for this celebration to take place involves a circle of twenty to twenty-five feet in diameter. The circle ought to be defined through drawing a line with a stick, or it might be created with yarn or rope that the leader provides.

Individuals are then encouraged to take a final five to ten minute walk around the retreat area and seek some object,

13 Ibid., Wallace 47, quoting Ross and Martha Snyder, "Meaning Formation," VII, unpublished paper, n.d.

that ties together the meaning of the retreat for them. They are instructed to understand that this object is symbolic, and they are to retrieve it and bring it to the circle described above.

After all have returned, the leader may begin by placing his or her object in the center of the created circle and then invite others to follow. By offering a verbal explanation of why that particular object was meaningful, most others will realize that this is the hope for their presentation as well. (Some individuals may not choose to say anything, and this is appropriate also.) At the conclusion of the event, all of the objects that symbolically represent that for which we were grateful or that in which meaning was found are dedicated and celebrated.

This celebrative moment for individuals is personal in that individuals make personal statements. Other moments on the retreat may find the group asking questions for clarification; these moments usually do not seek for clarification, merely an open mind and heart that honors the speaker.

Conclusion

As one relives one's story through successive lived moments, one is aware of membranes of meaning as well as a general sense of movement from one moment to another. Lived moments take place in a specific time in history, a time that both forms and informs our psychohistories. As one

interrelates several unique moments and claims these, one's significance becomes more tangible, even more important. Affirmation is important in that it focuses us on what we might have missed as repetitive themes, but also it encourages us to embrace similar experiences others may have had.

Creative writing, poetic expression and celebration are critical components for incorporating the community of faith (the Beloved Community). The Holy, personally encountered, becomes the center of all of our celebrating. In the celebration the woundedness of fellow travelers becomes a meeting place of shared tears. Through celebration, both the journey and its destination become integral parts of a meaning-filled whole.

Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults

A second option for caring groups, especially designed for older adults, is described in Birren and Deutchman's Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults. The book is especially good for those unfamiliar with small group process. Specifically aimed at helping the older adult to adapt to old age and find assistance at important crossroads, this work is especially adaptable to local congregations seeking to discern a more wholistic caring program.

Guided autobiography is an efficient way for older adults to review their lives by following a proven series of evocative themes and responding to questions designed to promote reflection. The group leader uses the themes and sensitizing questions to guide persons interested in

developing greater awareness of themselves through an organized recall of memories and emotions. 14

While the autobiographical process is not specifically designed as a therapeutic process, it does have a therapeutic value as a by-product.

Benefits of Life Review/Autobiography, according to Birren and Deutchmann, were reported to include an increased sense of personal power and importance, a recognition of past adaptive strategies and their application to current needs and problems, a reconciliation with the past and resolution of past resentments and negative feelings, a resurgence of interest in past activities or hobbies, and a development of friendships with other group members.

The first chapter of their book serves as both an overview and statistical summary of discovered identity. In dealing with the "Construction of Identity," for example, three self images are seen in contrast with each other: the real self (the self defined by personal interpretation), the ideal self, and the social image self (a person's perception of how others see him or her).

It could be argued that self-esteem arises from an evaluation of the difference between real and ideal selves; while self-efficacy, the feeling that you are competent and can have the impact you seek, is measured by the congruency between the ideal self and social-image self. Self-

actualization, satisfaction with who you are and a feeling of fulfillment from what you have accomplished, might then be viewed as determined by the distance between these three selves, with the greatest degree of self-actualization obtained by those whose ideal, real, and social-image selves converge. 15

Guided autobiography helps one to clarify the contrasting selves and expose the social image to scrutiny and review. Losses and role changes that elderly people experience are reviewed to discover successful strategies. Continuity provides a feeling of security and inner strength. As one hears the stories of others and compares them with his/her own experiences, he or she senses patterns of similarity that worked for others as well. In sharing stories of historical events and similar responses that various individuals have made to those events, people can find common threads that weave a strand of meaning with otherwise disconnected events.

The sharing of stories with family members is also stressed as a means of integrating one's place in that family scene (i.e., developing a context for belonging), while at the same time, helping others to accept unique perspectives that elderly people may have.

Role adaptive changes that the elderly must face are identified as well as strategies for dealing with change. Especially helpful are suggestions that the roles seniors may play in the future can be positive.

15 Ibid., 10.

If past strengths are appreciated, such changes can motivate the older person to develop new, satisfying, and productive roles that fit with current demands and disabilities. New roles for older adults are crucial to our society. These are particularly appropriate because older adults have often achieved a greater degree of wisdom. Just a few of these roles include: Mentor, Consultant, Confidant, Volunteer, Historian, Disseminator of the family legacy, Grandparent or great grandparent, Second or third career member of the work force. 16

Adapting to a new environment is never easy, but insights gained through guided autobiography may decrease feelings of loss and depression. Such "constructive reminiscing" can help transcend difficult changes.

In concluding their overview of the process, Birren and Deutchman touch on reconciling life and accepting death. Guided autobiography "assists older adults and others in developing a greater acceptance of death by promoting reconciliation of life's contradictions." 17

As the book progresses, the importance of the sensitivity of the group leader is underscored, and helpful hints for a successful group are offered. In addition to insuring that the room is comfortable, the size of the group should be reasonably small (five or six, not more than ten or twelve), and the purpose for gathering clear. The leader is also given some concrete suggestions about strategy.

16 Ibid., 20.

17 Ibid., 22.

Certain givens help to promote both security and comfort. Confidentiality is one of the givens that help to assure the greatest amount of freedom. The importance of not criticizing or, indeed, of even commenting, at least initially, is an important ground rule. The value of writing, while not always immediately appreciated, is quickly valued. The sensitizing questions, to which I will return, are important for helping the leader to know his or her task. Equally important, perhaps even more so, is the facilitation of process.

In one group in which I participated, the group leader after introducing himself, posing the task and making sure we were clear as to what our responsibilities were, appeared almost non essential. That is, his "leadership" role was to be unobtrusive, but encouraging.

According to Birren and Deutchman, "The purpose of sensitization is to stimulate recall and reflection, expand perspectives, and intiate sharing." 18 The leader however, need not have a book or even written guidelines for understanding his or her role after the initial session. Specific sensitizing questions seem to move the group discussion. Topics or themes selected for a specific retreat may vary significantly.

The sensitizing questions are questions created to establish one's practices and/or attitudes relative to a

18 Birren and Deutchman, 64.

specific theme. One of the themes suggested for possible discussion was "The Role of Money." Here the group was to examine our attitudes toward money and how those attitudes, good and bad, were formed. In that particular case there were fourteen suggested questions, some of which were:

1. What role did money play in your family? What were you taught about money? Was it scarce or plentiful?
2. How did your family's money compare to other people's money?
3. In your life, how important is it for you to make money?
4. How central is the role that money plays in your life?
5. Do you regard yourself as generous or stingy? Why?
6. Do you ever give money away? How do you feel about it? 19

As individuals are asked specific questions, hearers are encouraged to withhold comments until a later, appropriate time. This allows people to stay focused and not worry about the biases someone else may have. Still the leader has an important role in facilitation. He or she might ask for clarification, or note something positive and healing, or note repeated themes. By avoiding any editorializing, he or she models a leadership style that others will be able to emulate later.

While Martha and Ross Snyder used the concept of lived moments, Birren and Deutchman stress the importance of the

19 Ibid., 71.

word "salience." Salience is defined as "a striking point or feature" denoting that which projects "above or beyond a general level" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary). Group members quickly learn to look for salient moments, or repeated emotional responses which seem to be valued by the story teller. In the initial encounters, such salience may not be noticeable, but as sessions continue (usually the sensitizing questions become somewhat more personal, although not all would agree with this assessment), a pattern of similar responses become readily obvious. "Life issues that are emotionally salient are those that have had the strongest impact on one's emotions and that are powerful in determining a person's course of action or in shaping the identity." 20

"Particularly for older adults and others in transition, writing and sharing one's autobiography is a big step forward in integrating and developing a sense of direction in one's life." 21 The writing of short stories or brief interludes is the key to developing the program. As people become comfortable with this process and the ensuing sharing and interaction with shared stories, the sensitizing questions may feel a bit more intrusive.

As people learn to enjoy the process, the responses tend to disclose more personal life experiences.

20 Ibid., 60.

21 Ibid., 67.

Individuals who listen carefully and attentively are encouraged to be positive as they seek after more information or to remain silent. This positive kind of listening frequently encourages the speakers to feel relaxed and to disclose more of their personal story. At all times, the one who is sharing his or her stories determines the limits of what will be disclosed.

Below is the first of eleven assignments with accompanying sensitizing questions. While these are not fixed and do not limit the possibilities of questions that the group leader might choose, these questions might be adequate. Eleven sets of sensitizing questions proved to be adequate to stimulating considerable discussion and interaction in the group in which I participated.

THEME ASSIGNMENT 1: The Major Branching Points in Your Life

1. About how old were you at the time of the branching point? Place the turning point along a time dimension. The timing of an event is often very important. Did it happen too late? Were you too old?
2. Significant people? Who were the important people involved in the turning point? Father, mother, spouse? You alone? Often one notices that the same people are involved again and again in major life turning points.
3. Emotions and feelings at that time: What were the feelings, the emotions you experienced at the time the branching occurred? How intense were these feelings (e.g. extremely elated, somewhat sad, a little frustrated, very happy)? Sometimes our feelings in reaction to an experience are mixed or are changeable. Do not be concerned if your feelings seem contradictory.
4. Emotions and feelings now? Sometimes our feelings about an experience or event change over time. Something that seemed a disaster

when it happened may turn out to be a positive event later on and vice versa. What emotions do you experience as you think about the turning point now?

5. Personal choice? How much personal choice was involved in this branching point? How much personal control did you have? Was it something that happened that was completely out of your control? Who or what was the external influence?
6. Consequences? Branching points are "branching points" because they change our lives in one or many important ways. In your view, what are the ways your life was changed because of this branching point? How would your life have been different if it had not occurred? 22

Unique lived moments, whether discerned in the context of meaning making or autobiographical storytelling, focus in a similar process. Here the story teller claims a unique moment in his or her life as a means of self definition and integration. A sense of worth or fulfillment is enriched as stories are shared and a connection of meaning-filled moments are realized. Not surprisingly, the boundaries of shared stories seem familiar to us all. As we enter, or cross over others' boundaries, we are privileged to become a part of their stories and they an important part of ours.

Case Study of Spontaneous Autobiography

Thus far we have focused on meaning formation and autobiography. Also in our ministry we need to be alert to more spontaneous moments in which people tell their stories and others listen.

22 Birren and Deutchman, 68-69.

It was near the beginning of our Caring Ministries meeting when Sue came to join us; unusual for her, Sue was twenty minutes late, and the meeting had already begun. When she came into the room where we were gathered, we all could see something was wrong, very wrong. Normally Sue was strong and cheerful, today she was angry, very angry. Soon the anger gave way to tears as she shared what had just happened.

She had invested in the latest hearing aids. Not only were they very expensive, but in part, they appeared to be responsible for a painful ear infection. At least their unique configuration in the ear enclosure itself was allowing an already existant infection to remain unhealed. The words she expressed were similar to the following: "I phoned the doctor who sold these hearing aids to me and told him I was in pain. He knew I had to make a decision whether or not to keep these (new) aids within thirty days or return them. They are very expensive for me and I'm not at all sure they are right for me. When I phoned the office to tell the doctor of my concern, the receptionist told me that I couldn't even see him for over four weeks!"

As Sue told her story and her frustrating encounter, I saw the members of our Caring team deeply moved. I remember wondering at the moment which part of her encounter was so moving us? One after another, liberal hugs were shared, and mutual tears began to flow. While Sue's story was unique, the resulting emotional pain and frustration were emotions

common to each of our stories. At 65 years Sue was still relatively young and in good health. She sparkled with humor and insight. Yet, in this morning's moment she was vulnerable, frustrated. As she talked, and as we listened she became her "old self." The hugs didn't hurt either!

As we move through life, physical challenges will increase; of that we can be sure. What kind of physical challenges will confront us, no one knows with certainty, but will there be someone there to be with us, to hear us when we need to be heard?

There are places that seem more sacred because of historic events that occurred there. On the morning when Sue told her story, that office space seemed to be more holy than usual. This office space was not the source of the sacred, we could have been in any space anywhere where the story brought to life an encounter out of time. For the faith community, the stories of the scriptures again and again stress the challenges that face God's people in the desert and how these desert challenges become turning points or significant moments that give definition and character to God's people.

I wonder about the stories of faith like the one that inspired the dreamer Jacob to see a ladder reaching from heaven to earth, and angels climbing back and forth. While we may not understand what the dream meant, we do know that Jacob marked the spot with a pile of rocks, the common altar

of the sacred marking place of God's encounter with human beings.

The office was not any more sacred a spot than any other, but something holy happened there that morning as people of faith and trust reached out in sensitivity to touch the fresh wounds of one we knew. The story gave birth to a moment--a story no one had heard, but whose component parts everyone had experienced in similar stories of their own life's journeys. The tension arising in the moment's disclosure moved people toward sharing the load as fellow journeyers have always aided those otherwise temporarily broken. Yet, there was something more; the place where we gathered suddenly took on a life of its own as the moment was transformed by a vulnerable self disclosure. The spiritual and compassionate priorities of the group manifest themselves in such uniquely alive moments.

In the German language, a word is used to describe a place and a time that is unique to the people who embrace it: Gemutlichkeit. This word takes its meaning from an environment where warmth and acceptance are present in an invitational sort of way. People in such a space are invited to "take off their shoes" not because the ground on which they are standing is holy, but because the space created invites comfort and ease, not formality and disease. Kick off your shoes, be comfortable, and also trust; trust that in letting your hair down, in becoming vulnerable, you

will not be laughed at or hurt or diminished; you will be loved and treated with dignity and respect.

In the case of Sue and the caring team, the space was created from somewhere within each of us, each who understood the value of such acceptance. Yet, it only came to life and movement in the tension of the realized moment. The community of faith seized the moment, and it has become a part of our story too. Something happened in that space; an unknown story was revealed, but we all had heard it. Sue's vulnerability was exposed in trust, and trust was reclaimed and empowered -- a unique empowerment that is understood by those who understand the paradoxical truth of empowerment coming from God in our weakness.

In that unique moment, something of the promised Kingdom or Reign of God became realized. All of these emotions and hopes and love came together in our response to one simple lived story moment, but the ground where it was told became holy ground for us all.

As the Caring Team on that day began our discussion about the needs of our shut-ins and those facing significant transitions, I noticed deeper sense of commitment to protecting the dignity of others as though the story we had just experienced had shaped the way we wanted to live. We were a simple group, but a simple group commissioned by the One whose unique trustworthiness transformed all time by his life, his death and his resurrection.

Summary

We are increasingly aware of time, it seems, as we seek to create time saving devices through marvels of technology and computer science; as we seek to travel the greatest distances in the fewest hours, and as we seek to produce more and more things more quickly than our competitors.

We live in a time when people are healthier and more vital at older ages than any other recorded historical time, but also a time when attitudes about identity are still tied to one's chronological age, not to one's interests or passions. It is a time when older concepts of community are being fragmented and when neighbors are now strangers.

The late twentieth century has seen human identity challenged by the speed of change that technology has fueled, by the attitudes of corporate America that have moved people away from homes where they knew neighbors and were close to family, and by a well orchestrated societal emphasis on youth and vitality. Older age makes the home of our bodies more frail, but we who reside there know it to be more than a frail outer shell. We are stories in these mortal houses in which we dwell. Retirement and older age may, indeed, be the richest time of our lives to discover talents long dormant and dreams yet realized. Aging might be seen as growth in new skills, in new relationships, in newly energized concerns for social justice. Aging may be likened to a journey through time and space. In this journey there will be obstacles and/or detours where we will

experience crises. In this journey will also be momentous encounters that will provide some of our most profound and meaningful insights about our life's purposefulness.

The Christian community also seems to be moving into a different place as it seeks to hear with greater care and discernment the stories of those whose lives are in transition. Cries for liberation not only confront traditional forms of social tension, like racism and poverty, but speak with words that challenge language itself. Rebecca Chopp and others help us to understand how language either reinforces attitudes of dominance and submission associated with maleness, or how our changed language can change attitudes to empower all people to be more whole.

Today is a time of opportunity for the Christian community--a time when we can see the absence of human touch and interrelationships, an age that honors computerized isolation in everything from the automobile assembly line to a teenager's video game. It is a time when human beings are living on the fringes of existence, when whole families reside in the family car. The historic moment in which we live creates the landscape for our lived journey, but how we respond to any moment in time becomes the essence of our story. Still, it is our time, and a time in which a new chapter may well be the best ever written.

The Church is not only the keeper of ancient story, but also a weaver of new stories. Using the threads of familiar

biblical stories, we can discover truths that have endured. Stewardship for the creation, for example, enables one to see the earth's resources as a manifestation of God's generous caring for us, but also as our call to care for that creation. Those who spoke ancient truths to life were artists with words who attempted to capture God's intent and leading.

A long honored theme of journey toward home still resonates with our contemporary story. There are many encounters on this journey home, moments where historic events like war and depression leave their imprint; yet there are also peak experiential moments where the spirit of God's caring seems unmistakably real and empowering. Kairos moments are moments of caring within chronological moments. Those Kairos moments are to the artist what measurement is to the scientist, unique, sacred, caring moments that inspire more than measure time.

Caring is a belief posited in ancient story; God loves God's creation and calls us back to Him/Herself. As seen in the Bible's prototypical story of the prodigal, his lostness, his arrogance, his turning, and finally his embrace in his father's arms; are all places where God is found, and these are places that God would have us be found, in God's arms. The Prodigal Son story embodies the timeless truth of the Bible's call to journey toward home. Here we encounter movement against accepted norms, sin as the result of careless stewardship, the vision of healing as the

prodigal comes to himself, but most significantly, the embrace of the parent who has been longing for the lost to be found and who welcomes the lost child home, to the place where he is accepted and loved.

Caring teams of people within local parishes can breathe new life into any sized church. Pastors of small churches especially are grateful to have help relating to the needs of the elderly. In seeking help for their own decision making, pastors discover that teams of caring people provide wonderful feedback. Often in the interchange amongst the caring team members, the pastor learns a great deal about his/her parish.

Stories need to be envisioned as a bridge between ideas and practical experience. What occurs within the process of storytelling enables us to see how one connects ideas into a meaningful whole. The form and content of specific stories when compared to others, allows us to look for phenomena that are similar, but whose results may have been vastly different. Elzando's image of a parade marching past the tombstones of the defenders of the Alamo captures much of his imagery in a story that not only bridges concepts, but helps the reader to understand people of different races and cultures merging in time, and yet, also moving toward a future where God seems to be leading.

The model of hospice, with its inter-disciplinary structure, offers a guide for the organizational structure of local church caring teams. Even more important for such

caring teams, however, is the story behind hospice care. This caring, in its original form, was one of people touching wounded pilgrims who fell along the way, people whom the world largely did not value. These were the sick, the lame, the dying. In giving dignity to the traveler with health needs, the care providers were living as servants who cared for others as much as, and sometimes more than, self.

Importantly, the church is the teller of the stories of a unique family of faith. The stories of the Old Testament, as well as the New Testament reveal not only the essence of Israel's journey, but the relatedness of individual's lives along the way. Jesus, in his teaching (frequently in parables), and communicating, also emphasized the importance of journey toward a destiny or fulfillment of God's will. An example of this is the story of the Prodigal. The lost son left home, struggled with his sense of direction, and ultimately returned to the place where he found completion. Interestingly, the journey of Jesus' life itself was one of movement always toward Jerusalem, and ultimately, Easter. Along the way he taught people how to live more fulfilled lives, all the while focusing on the love that bonded heaven and earth together. The future still seems as uncertain to us as it did to the original followers of Jesus, but we of the Church have been blessed by teachers who keep teaching from the heart, and because those teachers live out the story, there is hope for us all.

Many people believe that their personal life stories are so interesting that they ought to write a book about their experiences. They are probably right! Our life stories are intriguing, and writing them is one way to touch what we think significant and celebrative in our personal lived adventures. Writing makes manifest something we may not have connected before: The stories of our lives communicate what events are especially earmarked as formative landmarks. Caring Ministries may make good use of processes such as journaling and story telling in retreat settings to help people shape fragments of their life stories into whole chapters. A narrative theology helps us to integrate the journeys of our lives as we move toward home.

Along the sea shore runs highway 101. Many vehicles travel that road in an effort to escape from home to reach wonderful vacation destinations. Some pull off at scenic overlooks to see the ocean and sea side wonders. Those who do pull off are able to discern life's connected overlooks. They are also able to see the endless line of automobiles and motorhomes running bumper to bumper along highway 101. In seeing the linear flow of traffic from the scenic overlooks, one can discern a different perspective of progress. Similarly, people can view life as moving chronologically from birth to death, measuring the progress they make along the way, or they can step back and get another view.

Some people, like some cars along the seaside highway, will pull off to the scenic overlooks to see if there is another perspective that is more complete or more whole. Those who pull off to reflect on the beauty of that unique spot will learn to anticipate other such inspirational stops along the way. Those who anticipate that life is an adventure offering new insights and opportunities are blessed by their discernment. Those who pull off more and more frequently can also pause to compare their progress in life compared to the progress of traffic on the highway headed somewhere south or north. Life is either a one way journey from birth to grave, following the expected, logical curves, or it is something more, some connection of insightful moments that we have taken time to capture in memorable stops. Maybe in seeing these connections along the way, we touch a deeper sense of the Artist who makes all our journeys the more meaning-full.

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